



sounds like a lie  
(but its really the truth)

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All the stuff told in this novel is based on actual vents, that  
is been fictionarized to protect the innocent and specially the  
guilty.

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NOTEY BENNEY

(which is a fancy latin word for special note):  
the reader might notice some writing missteaks in this here  
book. I ain't got no scuse, I might should of done better, but  
as you will read, I bin through a lot and kinda got my hands  
full, an didn't have time to go back an make the koreckshuns.

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## Me + my heathenish attitude

You might think Angel-Elouise is a funny name cuz so many people make me out to be the opposite. An angel, I mean ... but in the famous words of Jessica Rabbit, "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way."

My daddy always said if I continued in my ways, I'd end up going where the bad people go. That's my step-daddy – he's a Baptist, a real, fire-breathing, sulfur and brimstone, burn in hell for all eternity, full-immersion Baptist.

My other dad -- my bio-dad – he's a Piscalpalian. They don't believe in hell -- the Piscalpalians, I mean -- or heaven, or Jesus or God, or anything, for that matter. Well, they do, sorta, but they they say them's just cymbals what can't be understode. Least, that's what my step-daddy says.

But I'm gettin' ahead of myself. Let me splain what I mean.

It gets awful hot in McCauleysville, Carolina. That's South Carolina? Which is where I come from, is why I mention it. During the summer, the heat creeps up and peels the paint off the walls of the houses, it's that hot, and there ain't nothing to do but sit around and watch the sweat drip off your nose – unless you go to the mall, which a lot of people do, but I think that's so stupid because so many stupid people do that and come wheeling out of the Wall-Mart with their shopping baskets full, their fat kids

stuffed into the shopping carts in and amongst all the stuff they just bought to replace all the other stuff they got at home that looks exactly the same and works just as good, cept it ain't new, an with this look on their faces like they've just received the rapture, like they've seen Jesus hisself come down and he told 'em they was going to heaven that very day if only they'd go out to the shopping mall and buy some new stuff.

(I know a whole lot about rapturing and Jesus because both my daddys are preachers – the one my mother had me with, and the one she's living with now -- but I'll splain that later.)

Like I was saying, all there is for me to do in McCauleysville is sit in my room under the swamp cooler till it drips a hole in the top of my head and stare at pictures of the ocean. Not the ocean we got here, a couple hours over in Myrtle Beach -- that's a little piddly ocean, with little piddly waves that wouldn't wash a youngun's little toy boat -- but the Pacific Ocean, way over on the West Coast, over in California, where things aren't so stupid, where the waves aren't so piddly, and where things are so all blessed good and boring and stupid all the time. If it seems to you that I have a bad attitude (and I probably do), I'll splain why as we go on.

McCauleysville is named after some Civil War hero who led a charge against the Yankees, or something, and kept a something like a million slaves on his plantation hereabouts, and whipped all the men slaves and had sex and babies with all

the women slaves – so half the people around here, both black and white, is descended from him, and you can't throw a rock without hittin' a McCauley – but when I pointed out in my history class project that anybody who done all that bad stuff wasn't no hero in any body's history book and proposed that we name the town MartinLutherKingsburg (after you know who).

Well, you can imagine, they made me out to be the bad one, alright, with some sorta heathenish attitude, and by the time I'm done talking to you, you'll probably have one too. Then we'll both be bad.

First off, it'd probably help if I splain who I am. And the next best way to know somebody is to meet their family, so let me tell you about mine. My family is so big (that's one of the stupid parts) that I've got two of everything. It seems like every part of my family comes in pairs like we was lining up for a pleasure cruise on No's ark.

I've got two Granmas – Granma LucyMae and Granma BettyLou. They live in a little shack out on the innerstate and Granma BettyLou is always yelling at Granma Lucymae on account that Granma BettyLou weights 350 pounds and don't have no legs. Well, it's not on account of that that Granma BettyLou is always yelling. She's always hollering at Granma Lucymae to bring her her pain pills.

But Granma Lucymae is very strict and won't give Granma BettyLou more pills than the doctor allows, so Granma BettyLou lies in her hog wallow of a bed, in their wee, little tar paper shack out on the

inner state hollering away like a hog stuck in a fence for her pain pills. "It hurts awful bad, Lucymae!" Granma BettyLou will shout. Over and over and over again. If that ain't stupid, I don't know what is. And that's why I have to sleep with a fan. I know that don't make sense, but it's what my English teacher calls four shadowing, which is another way of saying I'll fill in the parts of the jigsaw later.

My daddy –I guess you might call him my real father – he's a Baptist Preacher right here in McCauleyville. I say my "real" father because he's the one that made me with my mama. My real mama. Not the lady my daddy married later on, which is not my real mama, even though she tries to make me feel obliged to call herself that, but I never do, not because she ain't nice, which she is in her own way, but just to spite her and my daddy because he screwed around on my mama (that's a real stupid thing for a preacher to do, don't you think?), and that's why they ain't married anymore, and my mama's married now to a Piscapalian Minister, the difference being between a Baptist preacher and a Piscapalian minister being the Piscapalian has a college degree and don't yell so loud and sweat so much when he's preaching.

Also, he don't screw around on my mamma, like my son-of-a-bitch real daddy did, though I can't say that has anything to do with his being Baptist.

I guess you can tell I have a bad attitude towards my daddy, too?

Asides from my mama, who I've already told you a little about, and there's the lady my real daddy married -- her name's Deborah. She's a big haired woman with fake boobs she got over in Columbia and stupider than a pile of cow turds. I mean, she says to me one day, "Dick was gone for four hours the other day." (Dick's my daddy's name -- as I explain more, you'll see how appropriate it is, but you'll probably think I'm a dirty-minded person for even thinking of such things.) Anyway, she's saying to me, "I don't know where he was, and he won't tell me, he just keeps saying he had stuff to do. What do you think he was doing all that time?"

So, when she asks me this, I think, du-uh, what was he doing for hours at a time when he was cheating on my real mamma with you? But I clamp down on my tongue 'cuz I figure blurtin' somethin' that mean an' nasty would make me stupider than her, so I just say, "I don't know, could I have some more lemonade please?" But then I'm sipping on my lemonade and my attitude towards my daddy is getting badder and badder, and not Christian at all, as in honor thy cheating daddy and thy stupid stepmother -- and I just come out and ask, all innocent like, "Are there any ladies at the church that've been in special need of ministering lately?" Big ol' hair Deborah's hand was shakin' so bad, she couldn't hardly pour me another glass of lemonade.

Had to pour it for myself.

You see, my daddy's very handy at ministering to ladies in need like have lost their

husbands and might be looking for a spare husband that just happened to be laying around, unused, like my stepmother's old husband (he wasn't old, he was just the one before my father took her over) – but he was dead, so I guess that counts, sorta.

He was crushed by a thresher machine he'd been trying to fix. He was in a hurry, seeing as a storm was coming, and had to make an adjustment but dint want to waste any time stopping the thing, and he'd got right up in it while the blades was running, and it rolled right up over the top of him and spit him out in a 500 pound bale of alfalfa. They had to bury him in a funny shaped square coffin on account they couldn't separate him from the alfalfa straw, and my stepmama needed an awful load of ministering after that, you can imagine, which my real mama objected to when she found out – said nobody dint need that much ministerin -- and which is why she divorced my father.

And I would've divorced him too if I had the chance, cuz one time afore that, my daddy was so busy ministering all day and all night that he had missed my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday party. But do you think my mama said diddlysquat about that?

And do I need to tell you the answer to the question?

And does it sound like I have a bad attitude towards my mother, too? I reckon I'm just a bad girl on all counts. But I can't help it that everybody else is so stupid it hurts, and I'd rather be bad, like I am, than stupid as a wood door, like some of them.



And I have pairs of aunts and cousins, cousin Billy and cousin Bobby, aunt Susie Lulu and Aunt Sassy, and scads more – I'm naming only a few to give you an idea about the size of the whole stupid menagerie, really, like some god blessed No's ark, all the relatives going up two-by-two. But one only gay uncle. He's all by hisself. He's not really totally gay on account of he's married and has six children (three sets of twins -- three pairs, you'll notice, just like Noa), but he sneaks off and does gay things with other men. (Who else?) But, of course, I'm the bad one for noticing that stuff ain't what it's made out to be. Which is what I always do, but I'll splain that later, too, and a lot of other stuff that I can't think of right now.

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### my two Granmas

My two Granmas lived in a little shack set on the edge of this field where some people growed soybeans, which is sort of like blackeye peas except nobody eats 'em directly – they just grind 'em into flour like and put that into food to give it more protein or to make fake milk or veggie burgers that fool people who can't eat meat for one reason or another -- or dont wanna -- into thinking that they really are eating meat.

Not that my Granmas do any farming. They're too old for that, and besides, Granma BettyLou don't got no legs. She had them amputated on account of

her diabeetees, which is to say she had to have them cut off, so she wouldn't be much good out in the field, cept I suppose they could prop her up in a tractor and she could drive around all day if she had a mind to. That would be a sight, wouldn't it? my Granma sitting on top of some ol tractor like a giant rollypolly beach ball, teeterin n totterin fit to roll off first time she hits a bump?

Did I mention that she's awful big? I don't want to cast spursions and say "fat" cuz it's not really her fault, bless her heart. Since they cut off her legs, she hasn't had nothing to do but lay in her bed all day long and eat Granma LucyMae's Angel food cakes.

Granma LucyMae makes the most delicious Angel food cakes, which I was always partial to when I was comin up. I always thought they were made special for me, my name being Angel-Louise, which made sense in a way. After all, there was no Granma BettyLou food cake, or Daddy-food cake, or any other kind of food-cake, except Angel-Louise. It made me feel kind of special until my daddy smacked me one day and said, "You ain't no bargain, girl. Less it be a bargain from the five-and-dime." That made everybody laugh – like as to say I was cheap and no account – so I dint tell nobody after that how special I felt, but kept it inside me like a little secret treasure. Guess I was waitin for somebody to come along an gree with me.

But I'll get to that part later.

Sometimes Granma BettyLou would get in terrible pain, and she'd set to hollering, "LucyMae! LucyMae!" to have Granma LucyMae bring her pain pills, which was little blue and white pills that Granma BettyLou got off the medicate doctor, who wasn't the best doctor in town, but he was all she could get.

Ya see, he had a REPUTATION on account of something he did a long time ago with a girl that dint turn out so good and that people still lude to (which is a word that means they talk about it without comin' right out and sayin' what it was he done, but kinda start the sentence and raise their eyebrows and then look to see there's a child in the room – like, me – and stop, but everybody knows what they could've said if the CHILD hadn't been there).

But this INCIDENT made it so he couldn't get no regular patience so he practices on people the county sends over and such.

I guess it's a sign of how good he was that he was still, after all these years, practicing ... like he hadn't got good enough to just do his doctoring, he still has to practice. Just like when I was learning to play the trombone, I'd practice and practice n practice awful hard till my daddy yelled at me to TAKE THAT FOOL THING OUT IN THE SOYBEAN FIELD! cuz no matter how hard I practiced, no matter how much heart I put into my practicing, I just couldn't make myself no better at playing the thing. All I wanted to do was give people pleasure

lissening to me, but I just ended up annoying them so. I guess the doctor's sorta like me, that way.)

But when Granma BettyLou set up a hollering for her little blue-and-white pills, "Lucymae! I hurt, Lucymae. Bring me my pills," Granma Lucymae would shout back, "It ain't time, yet, BettyLou. You have to wait till the doctor says. I can't give you no pills till it's time." And then she'd go outside into her garden – cause she kept herself a little vegetable garden outside where she growed peas and corn and tomatoes and such like, that she fixed up and made people eat from time to time – not that she needed to, cuz tween her food stamps from being so poor, and all the food that my folks and all my uncles and aunts brought over – and my daddy always taking her shopping.

All the time I was growing up, I remember my daddy saying, "I'm going over to take Granma to the Piggly Wiggly." It's like they went shopping every blessed day ... well, between all that shopping and the garden, an seein how they dint have nothin else to do sides eat, those were two big ol wiggly piggly Granmas I had. (I don't mean to be mean, but the truth's the truth!)

But Granma LucyMae'd go out into the garden so's she wouldn't have to listen to Granma BettyLou callin' from her bed. I seen a caf stuck in a fence once, and it was hollering and balling for its mama something terrible. And all the time it moved and tried to get lose, the barb wire cut it more and tangled it more till it was just a mess of hamburger

meat, and it bawled and cried even louder. And that's what Granma BettyLou 'minded me of I heard her crying out in her bed for her little blue-and-white pills.

And one day when Granma Lucy Mae was outside in her garden hunkering down in the dirt like some old taffeta hog rooting in the soil, and Granma BettyLou was setting up her balling, I did something bad. I snuck into the place where I'd spied Granma LucyMae keep the little blue-and-white pills and took them in to my Granma BettyLou. I know it was a bad thing to do, because it wasn't the proper time for her to have her pills, but I remember how Granma BettyLou was the one who made the cake especially in my honor, and I just couldn't let her lie there in her bed hollering like no calf tangled up in a chain of barb wire. And I gave her a pill.

She took it with shaking hands and gobbled it down, real greedy like. "Bless you, child." It'd been a long time since anybody blessed me, and I guess I needed it, on account of my doing something so against the DOCTOR'S ORDERS. And while she was lying there panting real hard like she was fighting with the pain, I parceled her out another one, and she took that, and presently a calm pieceful look came over her, and after I took the pills back and slipped them back in their little hidey place, I went back and sat with Granma BettyLou and we had the pleasantest time, talking bout goings on at school and what boys I was partial to and such like, until Granma LucyMae came and seed us. She looked

kinda sideways at Granma BettyLou, and she looked awful hard at me, like she spected somethin, but I just smiled as sweetly as I could, and she couldn't say nothing on account of she dint know nothin for sure.

But she did wait an extra half-hour to give Granma BettyLou her pill ... and might've waited even longer, exceptin' I piped up innocent as I could, "Oh, isn't it time for Granma BettyLou's pill?" and then she had to give up the medicine, but you could tell she dint like doin it, parcelin it out like a poor person at the market counting out their last tiny bit of change. And you could tell from the way she studied the bottle, she was trying to pry its secret out, and when she put the bottle back, it wasn't in the same place but a new hidey place where she thought I wouldn't be able to find it.

Granma LucyMae would say it was godswill that Granma BettyLou was suffering like that, and that it wasn't for us go against the DOCTOR'S ORDERS, but I couldn't no way see through to what the two had to do with each other, though maybe if I paid more attention to Granma LucyMae's Bible verses, that would have been more clearer to me, and I would have done the right thing instead of the bad thing that I did.

After that, whenever I came over, I rooted about the house to find them pills. There weren't no hidey place I couldn't find, partly cuz after a while, Granma LucyMae would run out of new hidey places and forget she'd already used one and I already

learned all the old ones, and I would find them pills and give one or two to Granma BettyLou, and I suppose it wasn't right what I did, but it seemed to make her so happy, and she and I would have the pleasantest time after the pain eased away from her.

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## I fool an old lady

Out back of the neighbor lady's place, her name was Miz MacGillicuddy, and she was the cussediest old lady you ever did see, she was always shouting at us kids not to trample on her petunias, or walk on her grass, but most of all to keep my dog Smelly away from her rabbits, Smelly was a big ol black Labdoor -- he got his name because even when he was a puppy after he'd ate, he'd let out these humongously smelly farts that drove everybody from the room, which is why we took to feeding him outside, and well, Smelly liked to get into old Miz MacGillicuddy's rabbits, which is what I was trying to get round to, which is that Mrs. MacGillicuddy used ta keep a regular rabbit hotel out back of her place, with the rabbit hutches stacked two and three high and forming a kind of a half circle with a tree stump in the middle.

Miz. MacGillicuddy, she'd be pettin and feeding and cleanin those rabbits near everyday. It was like they was her babies. I don't know if she had her any real kids. Them rabbits seemed to do just as

good, the way she fussed over them so. And the funny thing was, every Sunday Mrs. MacGillicuddy used to go out to her rabbits and sit on the tree stump with her Bible and read to them like they was her flock and she was the preacher (which everybody knowed was a foolish thing on account there weren't no such thing as lady preachers). Her rabbits would be munching on their bunny kibble or their lettuce or their carrots and whatnot like they was blessed communion wafers, and old Mrs. MacGillicuddy would be sitting there on the tree stump in her Sunday floral dress and Sunday bonnet in the spring and summer, and wrapped up in her overcoat during the cold months, and go through go through her sermon – reading from a passage from the Old Testmint, then something from the Godspells and then something from the Letters or Ax, all the time working herself into a fervor to save them bunny souls.

So you can imagine the fit it put her in when Smelly would get out of his yard and into her rabbit hutches. He'd be running back and forth, barking and carrying on, his tail wagging, and him leaping up against the rabbit hutches like he was trying to knock them over and bust into them, and Mrs. MacGillicuddy would be screaming, "I'm going to send that dog to the pound. I'm going to call up the pound, and they're going to come and take that animal away way and their going to youth-in-nize him! That's what I'm going to do if'n you don't keep him in your yard!"



I dint exactly know what youth-in-nize meant at the time, but it dint sound good; and my mama later told me it meant put him to sleep, which at first I couldn't figure out why Smelly needed any help going to sleep –he seemed to do that well enough on his own, but then Loopey told me it really meant she was going to have him kilt. So every time Mrs. MacGillicuddy threatened to have my Smelly put to sleep ... he'd be barking, Miz MacGillicuddy'd be screaming she was going to call the pound, and I'd be trying to tug him away from there crying and begging with her to give my Smelly one more chance, he dint mean no harm, he was just a dog, doing what come natural, which dint seem to cut no ice with her at all.

One day I came home from school and thee was Smelly lying in the middle of the lawn with a big grin on his face and one of Miz MacGillicuddy rabbits 'tween his paws. The rabbit was all dirty like Smelly had chased it through the mud and thrashed it about. Here, I was in a fix. Miz MacGillicuddy would sure have Smelly youth-in-nized now if she found out about Smelly killin one of her precious fool rabbits.

(As a Christian, I'm supposed to love all living creatures, but I guess you can tell I had a bad attitude towards Mrs. MacGillicuddy's rabbits because they was going to be the death of my poor ol' black Labdoor.)

As soon as Smelly saw me, he knowed I knew he'd done something bad. And just in case, he was in

doubt, I told him so. "Bad dog!" I said. "That old lady's going to have you put to sleep now. And that means having you kilt, too" He put his head low so his big jaw was covering that bunny, like he thought maybe if he just lay there, I wouldn't notice the white bunny fur peaking out from under his massive head and paws, and all the while I was yelling at him and scolding him – I was in a terrible fright – he just sora lay there and rumbled, this low growling-like coming up from his big black chest.

But I weren't scared of him. I knowed him when he was a puppy --I'd found him wandering down the middle of the street, just a swollen belied, lice-ridden, mangy, as-close-to-death's-trap-door-as-you-can-get-without-falling-in-little mutt as you'd ever seen. And I took him in, and even when the vet said the poor little creature's near gone, might as well put him down (which is another way of saying to kill him – it's funny how many words we have for to kill something because we don't want to say the real word), and I wasn't going to lose him now, not to one of Mrs. MacGillicuddy's fool rabbits.

So I swatted that stupid dog on the head and beat him on his butt and scolded him and told him how disappointed I was in him, and what was going to happen to him till he finally saw some sense and let me have that rabbit.

It was then I knew what I had to do. I took that rabbit inside and I washed it up good. I shampooed it twice, just like it says on the bottle – "Repeat as necessary" -- even though they wasn't

thinking about no dead rabbits when they wrote those instructions.

When I thought it was clean as a rabbit outta be, I took out my mama's blow dryer, and blowed it dry and fluffed up its fur till it was all nice like an clean an white as an Easter bunny. I even put a daub of my mama's mascara around its eyes where it'd seemed to have lost some color from its tangling with that fool dog.

Then came the trickiest part. I stole back over to Miz MacGillicuddy's yard – thanking the Lord she wasn't home just then. There was the cage door hanging open. That's where I figured probably Mrs. MacGillicuddy had missed latching it all the way and where Smelly had gotten inside at the rabbit. So I slipped the critter back into the cage and eased the door shut and latched it tight, hoping all the time Miz MacGillicuddy'd find it and think it died natural in its sleep.

The day seemed to go on forever till Miz MacGillicuddy came back. I was out in the front yard pretending to play in the dirt when she finally come back. She'd been to see the Preacher, no doubt petitioning for her beloved bunnies souls to be admitted into heaven or something, I could tell – the part about being to the Preacher, not the bunnies – because she had on her best dress and her shiny black shoes and her fancy wax straw hat like she'd been trying to impress him with how godly she was – though what that get up had to do with being GODLY, I never could figger out no ways.

She came traipsing up the walkway and I say, 'Lo, Miz MacGillicuddy" in a low, soft voice, not so loud that it would call attention to itself, but loud enough so she'd know I wasn't lacking proper respect, and crouched there not breathing for the longest time, waiting. I was picturing in my mind the steps she was taking in her house. Setting her bag down on the kitchen table where she kept it. Walking into the bathroom and taking a pee. Standing up and washing her hands. And then going outside to say hello to her damn rabbits (excuse my language, but I just said that to express how I was feeling at the time – I wasn't too fond of them stupid beasts at the moment).

That's when I heard the scream. She screamed long and loud, like a fire truck siren, so that it pierced inside your skull like a four-penny nail. Presently my daddy and mama came running out of our house and around to hers to see what was happening. You can imagine I was all in a sweat fearing that my little trick was going to be found out and that I'd have to tell the truth (something which, in my wicked heart, I dint want to) and tell them what I'd done and more important what my black labdoor Smelly had gone and done.

When I got there to her little bunny hotel, Miz MacGillicuddy was standing in front of the dead rabbit's cage, pointing her finger like at a ghost and panting like she'd just run a marathong, and in between her panting and gulping down great gulps of air splaining in this high pitched voice, "I buried

little Jeremiah three days ago!" (She'd given all her bunnies Biblical names, like.) "And now he's come back from the dead! Risen like Lazarus from the dead! Only the fright must've too much for his little heart and he died again. Died and gone to heaven! Hallelujah! My prayers have been answered! HALLALEJAH!"

My mama and daddy don't know what to make of all this, and on the way back to our house, when we're safely away from the LAZARUS BUNNY RAISED FROM THE DEAD, my daddy stopped me on the lawn and bent down into my face and asked me in a that wasn't loud but had an edge of steel in it. "Angel-Louise, do you know anything about this?"

"No, sir," I lied, trying hard as all get out to look as innocent as I possibly could.

"Angel-Louise?" my mama asked, bending down low to me too, like as if I know anything, I'd better say it now.

But I was deathly afraid for Smelly and I figgered it was best to pretend to be pure-T ignorant. "No, ma'm," I said, but I couldn't look at her directly because she had this crazy eye that liked to look straight through me, and I took to studying my shoes like suddenly they was the most interesting things I ever done seen in the whole wide world.

I was never loud to forget the wicked thing I done in deceiving that old woman cuz after that, Miz MacGillicuddy never let up on her MIRACLE BUNNY, never missing a chance to put people in mind of the rabbit that rose from the dead, and when she finally

died, and we went to her funeral, I saw that at her instructions, they put on her tombstone one last reminder of the wicked trick I'd played on her:

Gone to heaven,  
but preceded by her beloved Jeremiah.

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even a fool

I was over at my Uncle Gerald's house just after church one SONday. (That's what we call it - it's not a "sun-day" on account like my Granma Grace says that we ain't no pagans going round worshipping the Sun -- though i don't know if there'd be anything so bad bout that, i just love to sit out on the veranda on a summers day letting the sunrays lap over me like soft ripples on the lake up at the dam, but my Granma grace sez that's my blood talking ... only she uses the N-word when she says it ... well, there ain't no need for me to put a coat on the lily, what she says is, it's my pagan nigger blood -- there i said it, but you should unnerstann she don't mean it as mean as it sounds), but anyway it's a SONday on account of it's the day that we set aside to visit with the Son of the Load.

I don't know if i mentioned it but my familys real big on going to church. My granddaddy was a minister and his daddy and granddaddy as far back as the eye can see 's been profits. We's been the pills of the church, like they say. Even on my Granma grace's side theys been real ligious, like. My Granma Grace says she got her name from the song Amazing Grace, How Sweet Thy Sound -- which woudda made an awful long name, so's i guess they shortened it up a bit.

We was home from church this one sonday and little Reebecca -- thats my litle neece and i just love the bejesus out of her -- well she was sitting front of the tv watching Tellatubbies and in comes my Uncle Gerald, and he stops so quick he'd as like as fall over on his face and he stands for a minute his mouth hanging open and his eyes bugging wide and then he cries out like he's just seen his prize she-dog (I cant say the B word) getting done by a stray runt, "STOP THAT!"

And when everybody turned to look at him like they dint know what he was talking bout, he shouted out again. "Your poisoning our child!"

And poor aunt sara -- she ain't blood but i love her just like she was -- she's a gentle soul and don't mean anybody any harm an is always trying to make Uncle Gerald happy, and she takes this look on her face like unbeknowgst to her she done went and axly poisoned there only little girl -- she was terrified and stupidfried all at the same for instance.

When nobody moved, mostly cuz nobody'd caught on yet what he was talkin bout, he screams out again. "TURN THAT INSTRIMINT OF SATAN OFF THIS MINUTE. YOUR POISONING OUR CHILDS MINE!"

Then aunt sara speaks up but in a soft whiney voice, "Ain't nothing wrong with that, Gerald. They's just cartoons. "

"Oh, so you WANT poor Sara to watch a cartoon with homoSexual characters and all sorts of gay goingson?"

Well of course aunt sara dint want that so she dint know what to say, and i dint mean to say nothing, and i told mysel that i should stay outta this, but it was like i heard this voice rising that sounded awfulmiliar, mostly cuz it was mine.

"But its just a cartoon, right, Uncle Gerald?"

And he gives me the LOOK. Like he just pulled over a spisious charcter he'd caught driving through his town. (He's the town sheriff you see).

I guess i kinda snapped. I mean usually I shut up lay low and then something like this comes up and Gerald starts in about hows theys programming babies to be gay (tho why theyd want to do that i dont know), but I guess its sorta like if litle kids like Sarah watch enough gay catroons she'll start dreaming about hanging out in gaybars when she growsup.

An i know it does no good....I hurt myself and get my feelings hurt and mess up my Day something terrible. And I don't know why i do it. I mean I am



not married and have no kids (and don't even want no kids, tho maybe when i get to be real old, like 40 or something, I'll adopt some older orphan who ain't got no home and give him someplace of his own) but there ain't no need for me to up an get into a argument that dont make no sense about the right to watch gay cartoons.

But it was this that flipped me out when Uncle gerald said, "Now, Angel-Louise, I realize this sounds very offensive, but it's the only way a Christian can look at it. They're infecting poor litle Saras soul and spirit, and as we're in constant war against the Forces of Darkness we've got to be ever vigilant, just like the Reverand Snodgras said in church. Look at it this way: if little Sarah came down with a disease that threatened her life, wouldn't you want us to take her to the doctor? Well heres this dis-ease that that threatens her everlasting life, shouldn't we do something bout THAT?"

Which always makes me think what if a kid becomes gay at 15 do you hold him down and dee-gay him (or her)? Does uncle gerald want something like gay concentration camps? which isn't so farfetch like it sounds, theres a minister over in Lincoln county that specializes in deprogramming gay kids ... mostly by locking them in a hotel room and reading the book of leviticuss to them -- specially the part about man lying with man and then being put to death (tho I'm not rightly sure if they read the part about being put to death for gathering sticks on the sabbath or not), but at any

rate, i hears they come out of that hotel room totally Notgay an totely Saved and dedicated to the Load, which goes a long way to demonstrate the power of the Godspell, or leastwise the power of being feared for your life.

But I say leave kids alone and leave em to grow up like they wanna grow up. I don't think his way can be the only way to look at something as huge as mucking about with the soul and spirit of a child like god made it. And that's what I told uncle gerald that however littlesarah turned out, even if she turned out to be the biggest gaymonger in all the world, or even Carolina, i'd love her all the same. And that if she wanted to grow up to be a gay teletubby, well, that's the path that god put her on , and if anybody came and raised a Cain against her to fulfill the Law, well, they'd havta raise a Cain gainst me to.

But when I tried to express this, it came out suckie indeed which is what made me both angry and not too clear. Well you see you can be unattached. and there fore think these things out... I try to do that myself....I see they are my family and my brain knows I can not win by attempting to change 100 years of Proud Church History ( my Grand dad's Grand dad was a Proud Elder of the Church) so for the most part I try n keep quiet and let people be, then once in awhile something comes up that is so wacky to my brain I say/email/call/ things I (should ) know will be taken the wrong way,

and be twisted into something I never meant.....like the gay teletubby thing.

The proverbs says that even a fool seems wise if he keeps his trap shut, so mostly I try but then sometimes i see something thats so wrong ... so just not fair ... or looks like for all the world so stupid in itself that i cant hep myself, i just snap. and i know it dont do no good. i just end up hurting myself and gettin my own feelings hurt and upsetin folks round me and it messes up my day so's i can't concentrate on nothing else, and upsets them so's they can't stand to hav anything to do with me, but ... that's just the way i am i guess, just a fool. but may be someday i'll learn.

~ ~ ~

hand in hand

I have 2 friends named Loopey. Loopey #1 who is a cutter-because she was date raped. On Lifetime movies of the week the cutters cut real neat like but Loopey hacks away.

An everyone looks away. That's why we stayed friends. Cuz I never looked away... her arms all bloody an stuff bothered me but not as much as her dry eyes. She never cries. She is proud of her lack tears but I think her blood flowing from her wrists are the tears. I told her that and she was glad someone got it. Got her.

So far no one gets me but when they do, I will smile at them like Loopey smiles at me.

Loopey-Laura is dying of cancer.....which is weird because she is only 9 months older than me. She has a baby she kept and one she gave away. She used to make fun of me---about my school lust but the last real talk we had she said she was proud of me, which was the last thing I thought I would hear from her. She was pregnant with baby number three. She didnt want to abort it. She was all afeared that would send her to ... well, so she kept It snug in her womb and it died anyway a few nights ago.

She hadn't been getting much treatment for the cancer because she dint want it to hurt the baby so now it is gone... and her cancer has spread and through all of this her hope is the Baby's father will MARRY her and give the kids a name. I hope I am not evil as in being glad the litel yun died but in going straight up to heaven it is being spared a Life here in Stupidville with Mandy an the fella that'll gladly get naked with her but wont help her take care of her kids.

I asked her the babies name. She was happy because every-one else calls her lost child "it" as in "I am sorry you lost it." The it was the a child, an the child was a girl, an she was named Genie.

Are people naturally so lost as to not know feelings count....

There is of course a part of me that tries not to be such a judge least I wake up and am my Granma....but I want more for my friends ---even the

Mandys, who dont know no better. So when I pray, I pray I can love them as they are... even if I don't understand em.

On the flip side they don't understand me neither. Love and understanding don't always go hand in hand.

~~~

I'm not bad i'm just drawn that way

The school I went to was a Chrissean school called The New Whine of the Lord Chrissen school. If you did something wrong -- most anything -- you got paddled. Paddled hard too! The Revrund Dick Hunter (that was his name, so help me! -- his mama and daddy dint do him no favors when they named him when he was a babe) ... anyway, the Revrund Hunter said the bible toll him not to spare the rod and spoil the child, an no chillen was gonna get spoiled on his watch, if he could help it!

Once the Revrund paddled a kid so hard, the police came and rested him for it. While he was in jail, he wrote a bunch of letters -- just like the Revrun Martin Luther King did when he was in jail, or so the Revrun said -- only Hunters letters weren't about letting his people go free but rather bout how it was all a columnist conspiracy gainst good God-fearing chrissesan folk who was just trying to follow the world of the lord that said to train up a child like you want him to grow up, and if you want a child to

grow up peace-lovin and Jesus lovin, you'd best beat the hell outta them everyday (which never quite made much sense to me, but I ain't got no doctrine in theology neither), and how he'd rather his kids died than go to the devil.

Well, the thorities let him go after a bit with just a slap on the wrist though if you axe me they should of paddled him good and hard. But after that things went back to pretty much normal at ol New Whine Chrissian Church school.

The work at the school was pretty easy. I would get it done in about 20 minutes so the teachers would just keep throwing more work at me to shut me up, which was fine with me as it kept me busy. Better than being bored wich is the worse thing in the hole wide world.

The hard part was keeping up with the dress code -- loose skirts below the knees, nothing tight, no nail polish, no flashy watches, no perfume, hair pulled off of the face, and no sexy ear rings neither.

I tried so hard to get it all right but I would always be forgettin something -- like to take off my black nail polish or my hair would come loose from the braid. One day I had on as bland outfit as you could magine but they had a problem with my open toe shoes (too much toe cleavage they said). I had to go home and change into shoes that was more modest.

The whole thought process being for young men not to look at young women with lust, so on the

flipside was that if they did, it was the girls that was to blame for tempting em.

One horrible day I had on what I thought was a normal skirt. It was at my ankles but the Vice principal called me aside and explained it was too tight. He'd been watching me a long time, but when he came up to him, he said he'd seen the boys watching me (though I'd never seen him watchin them). I tried to understand the whole concept, but I just did not get what he as saying.

But even harder than mindin my cues and peas was not laughing. They said it was a sin to laugh cuz everytime laughing is mentioned in the Bible its something bad and that no where does it say that Jesus laughed so they take that as proof that he walked around all the livelong day with a big sour puss on.

That by itself was so funny I just fell outta my chair laughing, which of course got me in trouble again.

After the whole paddlin arrest thing, the punishment for school crimes was deemerits, which was like black marks on your record. After so many of em the student had to scrub the church vans or clean the school bath rooms. If a student sucked up good enough with a pology and repented at morning chapel the charge was forgotten. But there werent no way I was gonna pologize for my dress or laughing at something that sounded so pure-tee foolish -- I'd be damned if I was gonna crawl on my hands n knees jus for being myself. Well, thats what

the Revrun Hunter said too -- that I'd be damned if I dint, only he meant it litral and I only was talkin figurative like.

I ended up cleaning something almost every lunch hour and after school.

But just like Jessica Rabbit says in the movie "You don't know how hard it is being a woman like I am. I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way."

~~~

talk to every stranger you can, litel red

It was Twosday and so far it'd been a great week and a horrible week. I knew I had to get done with all my homework in order to work at this one week job at the fair so I got up at 5 a.m Monday morning -- when the school site came on and worked all day. I was 100% done in two classes and only have one quiz in another. Then the job at the booth I was going to work at fell through so I had a batch of free time -- yesterday which I never do.

I went to the store to help my mother pick out new glasses. It was taking forever. I got a magazine and went through the line to pay for it. There was a petite girl whose name tag said Tony.

I asked if it stood for Antoine and she said it stood for Tony -- that was all. I said I would like to hear how she got to be named Tony. She said Really



because most people just make a joke after they hear her name, but this was the 13 items or less line, and the lady behind me was tapping her foot. Tony said she was going to take a break in about 15 minutes. The eye thing was ongoing because my Mom had to wait for the eye test -- pick out frames and so forth, therefore I just hung around the food court until Tony took her break. Her uncle was named Tony. He died before she was born in Vietnam. Her grandparents got divorced right after that because one grandparent (the dad) had wanted him to go and Tony's Mom had wanted him to run away. His sister--this Tony's mom--was a war protester then and so now this girl is too.

Even now years later the Granpa feels his son was a hero and the Grandmom feels he was wrong to go, so they still fight over it like it is fresh, and don't get invited to family stuff at the same time. Tony said she used to be embarrassed about her name because she was teased when she was a pre-teen but now she feels like it is an honor.

I had to write this down. How Death leaves a hole even years later. I got called in to work at a booth at the county fair but I didn't go because I wanted to write down what was in my head while it was still fresh.

So I tell Richard this interesting story and he was like, "AHHHHH are you insane! Don't talk to strangers!!! What if she was a crazy freak?????"

This was a girl stranger, I don't think she was going to slip me a Mickey an kidnap me outta Wall-mart at three in the afternoon.

There's sick thousan people at Liberation University and Richard feels like he dint make one true friend last year, asides from Jesus of course. He lived in a dorm (Richard, not Jesus) and doesn't even know what his room mate majored in.... witch is something I jus cant understand.

There is not talking to strangers and then there is being mute. There are near 5 million people in Loueeseana. I wouldn't of pland to talk to everyone I met but I couldn't imagine not talking to no one. I figure talkin to peoples the cheapest way to get an educashun. Maybe after I get a job and make enough money to afford work on a community paper, as a hobby ... just so I can interview people -- nothing huge with looming deadlines, but a place I can get to know people, with the safety of a press pants.

Since there is no money in this, Richard found it right up there with shoveling elephant poop with no shovel. Hard to have a Father figure when he thinks you are a smuck.

But it was this poam that I wrote into a contest entry given by a poet tree group that they liked so much they vited me to come down an read some of my poetree to em. So I guess the moral is Talk to every stranger you meet. (Except the ones with long teeth and big ears and dressed in your Granma's smock, Little Red.)

Is a way of life.

~ ~ ~

## a faithful descision

I am going over my poem line by line, to see where I can improve. I tend to throw out the baby with the bad water editing wise so I am forcing myself to be critical but not overly so.

On a funny end ...in ree-reading it I realised that with Richard the third - hees the fella my Granma wants me to marry on account he's so holy ans gonna be a docter -- he calls me his muse and I think of him as a editer as he is very good at tearing my work all to pieces ... so if I had ta marry him (which I have no intenshun of doing even tho he is my best friend) I would make him rich as I would be his insperation but I'd be depressed because he would suck all the joy out of me. Since I would be constanly reminded that he married beneath him.

The Third is trying for a double doctrine (to be a medicial doc & a business guru) so my lack of ambition is a bone of contention. He knew what his major was going to be at age 9! while I am still making lists of things I might be. I told him that my English teacher says one day I might have a book of poetry in me, and the Third said what is the point of a book if you can't make money from it?

Sometimes art is for art sakes. But since he wants to be a doctor, this God like wisdom will work well for him.

Me Going into a book store is like sending a recovering drinker to a bar I get tipsy although I do try to limit myself -- so many, many books I have a hard time choosing.

Kill a Mock King Bird was one of the first books I loved. It has such balance. It shows the dark side with the mob mentality against Tom Robinson (hees the african american guy that was accused of a crime he dint do), but it shows Atticus teaching Jem and Scout and Dill (thems the kids in the story that its told from their point of you) to stand up for what you believe -- even if you stand all by your lonesome. Scout thinks that mos people are kind in their hearts "when you really see them" -- is one of my life models -- which goes along with Anne Frank's too (I read her too) -- an she says, "basically I believe most people are good." Which is kinda hard tunnerstan how she come to that clusion considerin all she gone thro.

Its funny how some folk can go thro so much tryin tribulation (like it sez in the bibel) and still look at the world all rosyglasseyed like Ann Franks or Scout an her dead mock king Bird and some folk that aint seen no more trouble than an ol ladies Sonday social tea party is all down on the hole of humananity.

But I promised Richard the Third I'd get tough but it is hard because there is so much beauty

about. Maybe some people are put on Earth not to be tough.

Awhile ago I gave up dating, in part because I read a book called, "I kissed dating good-bye." Great title -- dumb book. Also, it was to clear my head and give me time to concentrate on getting into school, SAT's, GED, graduation and gettin my own doctrine jes like my friend The Third.

I told my best friend the Third and he said I am to stupid to date, so wait longer. After his paranoid speech of date rape drugs in every drink and evil around every corner I have been very clear. I'll hang out but that's it. I even went awhile trying not to smile but I failed.

The non dating has gone much badly more so then the dating. The worse incident was recently which is what i'm gettin at.

At the back of all my poetree is my friend The Third. He has lots of add vise. When I mess up he is always there to say, "Hey you really messed up!" I sent in my entry, 500 words or less, and forgot about it. I was shocked when I received a letter back saying I needed to come down to Norleans for this award dinner, and to see which place i won.

Richard is in Louiseanna so I figgerd i could meet him there an the two of us could pick up my prize together (seein how it was really his prize sense it was mostly bout him).

~~~

## *my companion of the soul*

Richard the Third is the son of our paster Dick Butts -- his daddy calls him Dickie but Richard doesn't think that's dignified nuff for a future spiritual leader. His granddaddy was Dick Butts too, so, Richard the Third it is! Tho i mostly jus call him The Third.

The Third is brilliant in a million different ways but he (so far) has not understood the joy of setting a goal that is out of reach and getting it met. If he doesn't think it will be reached he won't try. Whereas I believe that failing is part of life. Which is why sooner or later I'll drive him nuts. Its my purpose in life to fail small in many little things so when I fail big enough I won't crack.

A few days Ago he called and was very sad. So, as my Father was driving me to the Poetree contest and back again, an seein how we was gonna be in the neighborhood anyway, I asked my Dad if we might could detour to the Younaversity where the Third was studying for his Degree in Thee Ol Logee.

The whole trip to the contest and back was 1,110 miles and took exactly 24 hours. This was my mother's bird's first trip. He's a big green and red parrot and is used to sitting on top of a floor to ceiling cage and going in and out as he likes. Being shoved in a travel Cage was an affront to his dignity

and he screamed the whole time. And where he learned those words, I don't know, and I ain't gonna repeat 'em, but they were nasty!

When we arrived I called to tell him I had surprised him by coming up. I said, "I have news!"

And he said, "Are you seeing someone else?"

Which made me realize I had done it again-- looked before I leaped.

I was not seeing anyone, but I was not seeing him either. I was seeing -- well, life, I suppose, and where I should be in It. It sounds very clear in my mind but when I open my mouth it is as clear as a moonless night.

I tell him I am here and that my Dad agreed to drop me off if I paid for the car's gas bill. Richard is impressed and does the calculations, 1,101 miles with gasoline so high means I shelled out at yeast \$165 in gas for a weekend visit.

I just mean it to be friendly but Richard is sure as sure the engagement is on.

HA!

As I waited for Richard to get ready and I checked my cell phone messages. I had a message from a reporter because I was going to get interviewed for winning a thousand dollar scholarship. I received another phone call because I was being recommend for another scholarship, and I had a good chance of winning (if I sent in the korrek paper work). A friend called me and said some people from hollywood came into town to make a movie called Werewolves of the State Pen and

they're looking for kids to be in a big seen, and did I  
wanna try screaming? And some contest official  
called because I won two movie tickets to the  
premiere of a movie called Almost like heaven (I had  
entered the contest just before I left & forgot about  
it). I am actually having a better life in Carolina out  
of Carolina then when I really was in Carolina.

The poetree Slam was tomorrow an I was  
trying to write something to read but there is always  
the Richard factor -- I wonder if that isn't the reason  
I keep on writin (and weirdly the thing I like best of  
all about him) ~ he hates everything I write.

What does that say bout me?

Therefore I keep asking him what he thinks,  
only to be shot down. I image one day he will  
actually Not Hate everything I do.

This will not really happen but I pretend it  
will.

But I take his add vice and edit my poem.  
Here it is -- and don't tell me if you don't like it,  
that's what i got Richard for.

Enigma

I live in fear of bleeding adjectives.

Trying to take an inventory of my life

Cannot be satisfied with borrowed light.

Not all tears are visible,

Hiding

I cry in the rain

What happiness will be found?

Will I destroy it?



Everything I'm seeking  
Only in search of the perfect  
Me...

Richard the Third said: "Well, on the pop charts it would get a 7 or 8. On the art charts it would get a 2-3. The topic is so often over done, and the symbolism is overused. Sometimes what makes a poem great is what you don't say."

I wonder what he's not saying.

~~~

a garden with 85 aches

Be4 the poetree reading Me and Richard was going to a Botanical garden with 85 aches. I was really excited to have the chance of taking Pictures. Perhaps I will find a poem there. Also there is a Greek Festival going on for the 20th anniversary of a Greek church-that was burned down and then raised from the Dead. Just like Laz are us. Some part of the original building is still there. There will be a Greek block party with food, and costumes and Greek dancing.

Richard did NOT want to go to the Garden or the Greek festival or even the poetry SLAM and I realized that he was born 98 years old. And I tol him

going to a poetry Slam is not like I am kicking small puppies.

So Richard the Third went into a store & picked this outfit for me (right down to the huge shades). He said i needed to "look normal." What ever that means!

With enthusiastic single-mindedness my female peers fell in love n out of love all at a whirl wind pace. It seems to be the glue that holds it all together. I was in a stranger spot. The boys I dated were all alike --interchangeable monsters. All blondes, all of em druggies, every one of them had really bad relationships with their Dads, all multi tattooed, multi pierced, outcasts.

As cold-blooded as it seems (looking back) they satisfied a purpose for me: SECRUITY~

I liked to hang out but if I was single then other females (teen girls) got upset cuz they perceived me as threat. But if I had a boyfriend then they would relax, & single (aggressive) boys would leave me alone. Real boyfriends took a lot of work - which took away from other things. So my solution was monster boys who I had to put almost no enegy into....I was in my own fashion a good girlfriend, not clingy, or fussy -encouraging the betterment of the guy & then I would move and eventually get a new monster boyfriend. Then a monster boy really loved me. I felt horrible and realized how wrong it was to just date someones bad reputation.

Several thing happened the year I turned 14. My Granma decided I killed Granpa by visiting with

him to long. If I had sent him home just five minutes earlier she is convinced he would be alive. This was in December.

Three months later I met Richard the third at a poetry contest. I was midway in my boy diet so while the other girls were chasing the dudes I was chasing the contest win. Because I was in the zone and not seeking the boys, they chased me. They had all these cheesy, smooth lines --

Richard he read my stuff and ripped it apart, line by line. (He says "share.") He redlines my poetree but there are 2 ways to do it---the kind way which is:

This is what you did wrong/but this is how you can do it better.

Or the other way:

That is stupid -- that was a really dumb way to do that. How were you thinking about?

or

Blah/blah/blah...

He did it the first way, but never no mind, it was wierdly refreshing that he was so honest. I wanted a life long friendship. So I was willing to put up with Richard's less then positive qualities. I know he thinks he can build a better me ~ so to speak.

An I appreciated the interest.

I was trying to keep the rest of my vacation light & breezy. We went to this huge Army (funded) Museum. At each section he explained his political views. He wanted to see if mine could mesh with his. We were there from 10 to 5. The highlight of the visit was a 75 minute speech about how wise Hitler was (as a military strategist). After he was done I suggested we take a picture, because my political views -once I mentioned them- freaked him out. He ran away afraid the staff would get angry at my taking photos. So I had a passer by take my picture.

Then I got dressed up and went to the Greek festival. I ate moosakaa, a kinda Greek lasagna, and some kind of Greek cookies. I toured the church, and danced. Richard wouldn't come because he is not Greek... Therefore he would be out of place.

~ ~ ~

"Ships are safe within the harbor, but is that  
what ships are for?" (Unknown -- at least by  
me)

So with the complexities of life I see I cannot turn my theory of James into a reality. I will have to be strong enough not to need a full time critic. (If I

have to have it I'll keep Granny on speed dial.) I have outgrown the need to be hated.

When I move I'll just let the friendship fade -- because I am a mountain wildflower and he wants a lily in a valley. If someone steals my money -- it's sad, if someone steals my body it's horrible, but if I let someone steal my soul it will be tragic.

Strangely because I don't pout, cry, whine or fuss, The Third finds this relationship of ours his best chance for happiness.

My friend Abe - I'll get to him in jus a litel bit -  
- once said that the thing about people like this ...  
you never will convince them, no matter if you  
dedicate your entire life to trying. And as long as you  
keep on trying, they've "got" you. When you stop  
trying, that's when you win.

Maybe so but thats a lessin i aint learnd yet.

In a few hours I was going to be with my kind  
of people -- poets. I was eager to hear Florida poetry.  
I had a love poem of sorts -- and then two more  
serious things.

I have been showing deliberate restraint  
since I have been here ~ It will be nice to be with  
people who see things a bit differently. Poets are  
often drawn together by some invisible filaments (a  
great word!). The devine Emily said poetree was  
like the top of your head lifting off.

For me, poetree is like coming home.

not a love poem  
this feeling is not love it is

electricity  
it twists your stomach  
like the descent of  
a roller coaster  
even though the  
feeling of falling is  
an illusion  
blood threatening to burst  
your head  
Your hair dancing  
electrically on end  
and you  
sweaty palmed,  
eyes wide,  
heart pounding drum beats  
was not real,  
not love but just  
electricity.

~~~

*the pullet surprise eluded me*

For this poetry contest first a person had to go through the local contest, then if you win locally you are supposed to be given a mentor. It is the cool thing to pretend you don't need help, but I'm too Trailer trash practical for that silliness. I've never stayed in one spot long enough for any outside

career count sling, and small religious schools tend to tell guys to be missionaries & girls to marry well.

In fact at our school rallies instead of cheering for our football team (which we didn't have) the cheerleaders led us like

"We date! We date! We date for our mate!"

the idea being we'd pop a kid for Christ before we was a year outta high school.

There wasn't no expectation that a girl'd be interested in reading and writing poetry so I would've welcomed anything that came close to looking like a mentor. But I was in a town with no Writing mentor waiting for me in the wings, the group of literary geniuses being too small.

It was like I was a Army of One wannabe poet.

The stuff I write about is basically about me, a real life me -- Or people I know around me. A frictional me would be sooooo scary - the real me is messed up enough already.

The first poem I got published was when I was 7 or so in a crayola kids magazine -- it was about my dead goldfish. But when I moved here I was sad and entered a writing contest for a Christian magazine about questions I had for God. I was so wimpy then. But then I won and thought--ha- I can be ME and still make life work ...

When I arrived at the contest there were groups from California, Texas, & Detroit who had

banners, matching jackets and motivational chants. I  
dint have a banner, and my jacket dint even match  
itself, and the only motivation chant I could come up  
with was the cd sound track from the karaatay kid  
that i picked up from the good will hunting store for  
25 sense,

You're the best around  
nobody's ever going to take you down.

Sigh.

I decided it was to late to freak myself out  
and that I needed to make the best of it. After the  
judging, but before the announcements of winners,  
there was an open poetree reading. A bunch of  
contestants read their poems. Each was about black  
history, race relations, freedom riders, overcoming  
... and stuf like that.

I had a real problem with figuring out where  
to put comma's. Commas are my weakness, they're  
my bed nor (that's a fancy French word for some  
buggaboo that's like hiding under your bed -- or  
maybe its hiding in your closet or some hidey hole in  
the dark -- but any rate, it keeps coming out at night)  
-- but the point is, I tend to shove them everywhere.  
If a sentence is lonely I find a place for a comma. I  
am not asking you to overlook my comma addiction  
I'm just letting you know I am aware of the problem.

And I'm working on it.

The next day I presented my poem. I knew I  
was doomed as my poem was about being yourself.



It is about the season of winter who doesn't want to be anything but winter-- (tho really it is about a girl who knows who she is and doesn't want to be no body else). There was not one mention of race in my poem. When the others read their poems it was like "Rah! Rah!" Then I read mine and you could hear crickets chirp----it is actually funny now...I guess it is a case of knowing your audience (or Not, as the case maybe)

I had found out the trend for winning poetry contests was anger..... but mine was not angry...oooops. My story was based on a girl I no -- actually a lotta girls. My 9TH friend just got pregnant -- (well she wasnt my 9th friend, just the 9th one to get pregnant). Nine different girls in 18 months all 15 & 16 & 17 and none married ... not too much anger there ...

Just a lotta sad.

So I figgered my only chance was to dazzle them in the interview. The judges advise was to change the end to make it clear what happened to her and to have what they called a redemptive ending. Car the Sis, they called it. Some one told me that's a fancy Geek word for purging the soul. In that way, the ending'd be sorta upbeat (in a downbeat kind of way).

But all the time they was tellin me such bull poopy, I was thinkin this poor girl's allthetime gettin slapped round by her boyfriend, dumped no sooner n he fines out she's pregnant with his own kid, and they want clothes sure and redemption.

I was glad they was considring giving me a prize but I think having a Clear ending would have been the Lazy way -- to make things neat and tidy seemed like a cop out. There's no way that girl's ending is nothing but sad and tangled and all mixed up. The only upbeat ending i could see inside that play was she gets upbeat side the head!

After that sperience, I realized Litry Fame wasnt gonna come nocking at my door -- more like I'll get visited with Selling Plasma and his good buddy Eating Lots of Rice (which will just be a Memory when I get my degree an then later I'll get my Masters and then my Doctrine but i guess now its all about deelaidd gratification and only after That maybe i'll cheeve somesorta litry fame and the Pullet Surprise - witch till now has luded me).

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### *mad waiting*

The first place went to this guy who adopted a girl who had been burned when a crack lab blew up (not his), and second was a Dad who made lunches for homeless kids, and dressed up as Santa. Third place was a Dad who had adopted his dead sister's kids even though he had five of His own.

The piece I wrote about Richard was weak after all that but we got honorable mention, and a

small trophy with my name engraved on it, and a gift certificate to eat at Applebees. Richard later red lined the piece to show me how I could have made him sound better. I splained , "Hey! We were going up against a cracklab burn victim here ..."

But he'd doesn't like to lose. Like it was all bout him.

There was free lunch, flowers, the local media, and a bound copy of my original entry (all of which I mailed to Richard later). I was happy winning the little dinky trophy and the Applebees. Richard said it was still losing.

Anyway, I am sitting there and the waiter comes by, slams down a glass of water and glares at Me. I tell my Mom I think the waiter is Mad at me. (She came in with me as a Richard stand in cuz Richard said he was too busy gettin ready for the comin storm). She says I shouldn't be paranoid.

After speeches and entertainment we had to go through the buffay line for lunch, so we are standing in the line which is broken up into different sections: fruits and salad, meat, side dishes, rolls and bread, and those machines that shoot out soft chocolate ice cream that looks like diarea coming out a pigs behind.

We were at the side dish section and the mashed potato guy yells at my Mom. He said "Are you sure you trust me to give you food after your daughter HATES me and Everything..." My mom and everyone turns and looks at me like I was the crazy

person. I dint know who this guy was, except he was the mad one.

The mad crazed waiter serving us food.

He yelled some more then I recognized him. Many months ago he asked me out. I was in an independent film, and he was the script guy, and I said "No Thanks " but very, very nicely leastwhys I thought I'd bin nice. I'd tryed to splain how it was this faze i was going through, n I was too young, and i wanted to wait beefor i started dating, evidently i hadn't been too sessful in splaining myself cuz here he was screaming about how he had waited all this 8 hole months time to tell me. He kept yelling about how I broke his heart, til he sounded like a lyric from a cheesy Country Western song.

I dint date him, had never dated him. Only knew him briefly and said no politely when he had asked me out ... and now he was holding us hostage in a mashed potato line? Mama said, "Well I'm sure she dint mean to hurt your feelings, right Angel-Louise?" but the only thing I could think to say was, "Please don't spit in my food " and walked out of Line with as much dignity I could with the whole crowd staring.

Mama thought the whole thing was part of a very funny program. The program went on at the table with morenmore people giving their testimony's about their horrible lives and how their father figures rescued them but Mama couldn't stop laughing, even to eat her food -- which she wouldn't

of ate anyways since by now she was paranoid that the fella had put a booger in it or something.

What bothers me is if I have this much trouble when I'm Not dating what will happen when I actually do date?

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### Ofeeleea + the heart of the storm

The heart of the storm Ofeeleea was a bit farther down then where we was but as a caution many things (schools, daycare centers, banks, and etc.) closed. The extra rain and wind knocked the butterflies off whatever course they were supposed to be on. I was standing out in the rain -- which my granma BettyLou says I don't have enuf cents to come out of -- and giving them littel butterflies sugar water whenever they blow down to my feet.

Also, there were toads everywhere, and tree frogs, too -- not that I really know the difference. But one is kinda horny and dry and the other has this slick luminescent green skin -- I love that word -- I read it in something -- luminescent ... glowin like a beer sign on a foggy night. I was not really sure why they were hopping about in a crazed way but I put em in a tub to keep them safe & caught them some

bugs for 'em. They seemed happy (and dont axe me how i knew toads was happy, cept i did).

Then it got still, real still, like the whole world was holdin its breath, and then it rained some more, but the worst was over and people started comin out and movin about.

Richard the Third was still was hunkerin down in his duck taped bunker. (Back home, he and his family have canned food and a 6 month supply of water in case of the Paakalisp.) An my lack of panic really bugged him. I was going to an poetry jam later that night & he was upset cuz I was not more worried about a storm I couldn't control. He can look surprisingly sweet with his pleasant features and welcoming smile ... until I look into his eyes when he is sure I am wrong. They were dark windows looking in on an empty room.

When i tole him if he wasn't going to drive me to the poetry jam i was going to take the trolly -- Norleans has all sorts of trolleys running up and down the roads and I could just as well take one of them -- that's when he called me stupid. It was too dangerous he said. The hurricane could come and rip that trolley off its tracks just like the tornedo in the wizard of oz and settle it down who new where.

I tried not to get into it with him, and i have to fess up that I may indeed make stupid choices but I do not choose stupid as a lifestyle. I think that's all the difference.

I look at the bigger picture.

Maybe the reason I am so calm is that me and my family moved around so much when I was little I have done the hurricane bit twice, blizzards too, and tornado's -- but so far I missed earthquakes, though once I was visiting friends in Sandeeaygo California, and two days AFTER I left they had a mild earthquake.

Just my luck to miss the only natural disaster i aint sperienced yet.

But I figure nothing in life is non threatning -- you can think you are safe, then choke to death on a chicken bone. Being careful is good but so is living until you die.

To make Richard more comfortable I would have to basically erase -- well, everything about me - - which is a horrible thought.

When he saw i wasnt impressed by how dangerous the streetcar was, he gave me a 25 minute lecture on how expensive the trolley is -- \$9 bucks or something -- but my point is not to ride the trolley every day but just to ride it once just to KNOW I rode it. It is like being in Philly and not seeing the Liberty Bell ... (which is actually a good example since he and I were both in Philadelphia, and he wouldn't take me to see the Liberty Bell, so i went by myself, so he should know better).

I suppose it is just in man's natures to change what they do not fully understand.

But not to change theirsels.

In order to care for me he neededto control me. I don't always understand everyone I care about

but I have no get desire to change them -- (-except my Grandmom BettyLou. I would make her mute ... but I'm jus bein mean).

And that's when Richard the Third asxd me to marry him. Well, it was sorta marry him but not like we'd be together man and woman, husband and wife, like ... not for a while anyways. You see, Richard the Third believed that GOD commanded mankind (which also included wimin only HE don't say so) to procreyate and if he weren't intending to be procreyating he had no bizness lying down with wimin as it says in the GOOD BOOK. So, Richard's idee was that we would get oursels married but not do nothing about it but live together as pure as brother and sister for maybe ten years or so till it was time for us to start a famlee and then only do just enough to get us some kids.

He said he was patient and would wait for my answer and not expect one right then and there. And that's when i wrote me a poem.

Of course, if the Third got wind of what i was doing, making use of his proposal to creyate a piece of poetree that wood just of led us to stupid fight #99, with him going on about simple poems not being worthy. And I wood of said that the simplest of poets lived a quiet life at 208 Main, Amherst, MA, an she was so simple she was beyond deep with such thoughts as,

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you-nobody-too?



An when she died they found 1,775 poems so  
if I have to try for years to get even one OKish one,  
good ol Emily Dickinson would understand.

Even if the Third does not.

So you see my angry compeled me to finish  
writing my poem.

~ ~ ~

### the girl who speaks with frogs

It was coming home that night from the poet  
tree jam that I felt that my cup was runningith over,  
like it says in the GOOD BOOK. It was runningith  
over so much, it was runningith over and spilling  
onto the table and from there runningith onto the  
floor and sweeping out the door onto the front porch  
and runningith out onto the whole world.

I was riding down the road toward home and  
the air had a stillness to it like the hole world was  
holdin its breath. The light from the moon had a  
bluefish tinge, and I member us stopping by these  
train tracks, watching that train go by, not a soul in  
sight, the woods on my right and left and the train  
just rumbling out of the dark shadows of the forest  
on one side and then being swallowed up on the  
other -- just this switch of light covering them cars

as they rushed across the road, like a huge, rough snake sliding through a waterfall of light. And then the train was gone, and I was all alone. I axed my daddy to turn off the engine of the car and so as I could step out on the road for a minute.

I heard a jay complaining somewhere in the woods. (They're the crankiest birds.) Somewhere, a owl called. And then pushing my hearing deeper and deeper into the silence and the dark, I heard a chirp. Just a tiny single chirp, like somewhere, there was a little baby bird trying its voice, as it thrust itself out into the world. And then in the blanket of quiet, as I held my breath and listened to the world breath, I knew right there, right then, that the world was perfect, but I knew it wouldn't stay just right because everything is always changing, and all good things have to be busted. You can't keep on blowing up a balloon for ever and ever, like we tried to do when we was kids, just keep blowing it up till it was as big as the whole world. No, one time or another that ol' balloon's gonna bust. And my time was coming fast, but at that moment as I sat there watching the midnight express running out of the night and snake back into the darkness, the whole world was just so ... I don't have a word for to describe it, 'cept ... just so.

I had a dream that night. I dreamt I was at a party, but I dint really know no one, 'cept maybe a couple people there ... and then somebody brings a phone to me I take the phone and it's a friend I haven't talked to in a while. Richard the Third. I'm

talking, and he says he's calling from Ice Land. Then all of a sudden it 'curs to me. "Dint you tell me you was in Spain? What's going on? Where're you really calling from?"

Not that I 'spected no great revelation or nothing. I was just curious, just puzzled, but then he said, after a long silence, "I can't answer that."

And more silence as he hanged there, like he was waiting for me to say something, and then I heard a click on the other end, like he hung up or somethin.

And I woke up.

And while I was lying there in the heat, the lights off and the moon catching the magnolia tree outside the window at just the angle that its leafs shined like silver dollars and the sweat drippin off the walls, I come up with this poem:

A boy who won't ride a trolley  
and a girl who sits in the rain  
and speaks with frogs

It came out sorta like a dream. But thats what my life was becoming. Like a dream i couldn't wake up from. It was all about how i forgot how to breathe and i was feeling myself being eerased. I promised myself i'll try even harder to breathe, but every minute I'm holding my breath and waitin for my next Miss take. Then all a sudden I am standing in front of a church ... everybodys dressed up in their Sunday best like and i look down and there i am in a

white wedding gown and dirty blue jeans. I know i shouldn't marry him but i feel its important to be worthy of him so he can mold me into something better than what i am. So I put my hair in a tidy bun, drink tea, and exchange ripped jeans for pale ivory wedding dress. Remembering not to giggle.

Remembering not to giggle was important because Richard found the noise extremely annoying. Last week after I spilled orange soda on his whiter then white car seat he shook his head in sad wonderment as to how such a spill could have happened. "Will you always be so messy?" he asxkt as I scrub until the stain disappears all the while muttering my pologizes. But I knew that to him my stain would always be there to be picked at.

I went outside where Ofeelya was pouring down her buckets of rain. The sky was black for hours and the rains seemed as if they would never end. Dawn shone on tattered butterflies barely fluttering and several dazed amphibians who painfully limped about.

It was then that Richard the Third came to take me to his basement duct taped against the ravages of Ofeelya -- the basemint filled with an extra heavy duty generator, fat red emergency candles, and shelves stocked with dust covered Paacalisp beans.

Arriving unannounced he found me kneeling beside the pool with dirty bare feet, and messy tousled hair. I was surrounded by my make shift hospital of milk cartooned homeless Monarchs

butterflies and bruised tree frogs. He said what he wanted was to take me to safety, but I new what he really wanted was an answer to his question of the night be-4. Taking a deep breath I readied myself to give a rationale splanation but the look in his eyes stopped me cold. First a step forward and then back weaving towards the boy and away again. Suspended between what was right and what was good.

So stead of saying anythin I dived into the storm swelled up pool. i was deetermind to stay under as long as possible until i either made up my mind or he went away. i made myself like a rock and sank down to the bottom. An the life I would have with the boy begins flashing in front of me.

And allofasudden in those muddy waters I saw a picture of how he saw me ... and how he always would -- like a gypsy who he wants to be a lady. I was something to run away from, not to; someone to change into somethin so far from what i realy was that i woodnt recognize her if i saw her in a mirror.

I sat there ponderin at the bottom of my undersee lair until the need for oxygen shot me up. Lungs burning, eyes stinging, and a less then dainty cough I was reborn as Aphro Dyetee coming forth from the sea foam on a giant scallop and walked to the shores of Cyprus so I arose from the chlorine aquaness, aware that the boy was gone as missteriously as he'd come, running as fast as he could from the reality of me.

I dripped my way back to my rabble of wounded butterflies and chorus of minuscule toads, knowing that in saving them I had also saved myself. He was the best I could of hoped for, everybody told me so. An now he was gone. I waited for the tears to come but in stead i realized that all at once I could breath again.

Just breath and breathe.

Then I giggled.

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Fate is a smart-mouth a-word at the back of the  
class

(We're not suppose to say this word but it starts with an A and ends with a HOLE, which ain't bad words by themselves so I guess I can write it.)

The day after i got back from Norleans an while we was still waiting for Ofeeleeya to come up the coast at us, we had this woman come into our class from Planning for Parenting ... Your Decision to make ... etc ... she was sposed to give us a talk about how we was growing into adults and now we had important decisions to make and one of those was our contraption decisions ... which she meant by that, I suppose, what contraption we was going to use to not get pregnant ... she showed us pictures of how the population was increasing till there'd be so

many people that we'd be like cockroaches climbing and crawling over each other, and there'd not be enough food that we'd be starving to death, though I gotta admit for some people sitting next to me on the bus that squeeze me against the the side, a little starvation might not be such a bad thing.

But that's when she done something that changed my life.

So Maggie Singer troops in with her Birkenstocks and bag of tricks ... her peach scented vibrator and her candles and her handcuffs (fur lined) and her strawberry and licorice flavored condoms and her obscene cookies, bread ladies with inverted chocolate kisses in their public areas and little pointy chocolate drops on their breasts and the breadmen with gummy worms coming out of their crotches.

What she tells is sex is good and how you can go bout pleasuring yourself (as she calls it) or your partner cuz, as she says, the best way to avoid getting pregnant is to massdebate.

It was then that in the back of the room Sevie Richards starts up an awful racket, like that lady actriss in that movie Sleepless Seattle where she pretends to have an organism ... only with Stevie, it's more like Texas chainsaw massacre. So, Miz Singer is trying to lecture while Stevie in the back pretending to rub himself (he's so gross!) I dint think he's actually doing anything on account if he were, he'd be taking a lot more interest in what he was doing rather than how he was sounding ... but

all the kids were snickering, while Maggie was talking about serious stuff like pleasuring your partner with oral sex and the relative virtues of lubricated or ribbed condoms and how mass debation can defeat over poplation.

“Whack off for to fight overpopulation,” Stevie volunteers, but Maggie Singer, she ignores him, like he wasn’t nothin’ but the lanky bit of no-account trash that he was. He was a red-haired, lanky boy, his face blotched with so many angry pimples you’d of swore he’d been set on by a swarm of bees. Ms. Singer, she was gettin’ to the serious part of her talk, about how having a baby is the most important decision you could ever make and how not having a baby is also the most important decision you could ever make.

She was an old hippy lady ... by which I don’t mean she had big, old, fat bee-hind, but that she was still walking around in sandals and flower dress and a one of those woven floppy bags over her shoulder ... you know, 30 years later and a continent away from where she’d gone to Sand Francisco and put that first flower in her hair.

So she comes flip-flopping in and shows us these pictures of starving children in Africa or someplace and tells us that it’s our decision how we’re gong to prevent unwanted pregnancy. “Who is ready for the responsibility of starting a family here,” she asks, like any kids we did have was gonna turn out to be little, black, starvin’, big-bellied pickaninnies in Africa or such like. Not one of the



kids raised their hands, though a couple of the boys snickered.

But boys will always do that no matter what. (No offence, tended ... they're just boys, they cant help theirselves.)

Anyway, she pulls this cucumber out of her purse. I aint never seen such a large vegetable. It was 13 inches long if were an inch, we all just kind of stared at it ... and Maggie ... she insisted that we call her that ... Ms. Singer was too formal she said. "Does anybody know how to put a condom on a cucumber?"

I just about died. Why would anybody who was in their right mind wanna do that?

Stevie Richards -- and i think i mentioned he's a real smart mouth, always has been since he was in kindergarten -- he raises his hand and says, "No, ma'am. I only enjoy unprotected ... vegetables." And he says it just like that, so there's a big pause in the middle of his sentence, so everyone thought he was going to say "sex," see, but then he says vegetable, and the whole class breaks up.

Ms. Singer just makes a tight little smile like she's heard it all before (which she probably has) and goes on to say something like it's alright to make jokes because sex is supposed to be joyus -- that's the word she used -- a joy-yus experience. "You should have fun with it. It's one of your rights as human beings."

"Life, liberty and the pursuit of pussy," Stevie says, just under his voice so Ms. Singer couldn't tell

where it came from, but I recognized his voice and gave him that look, you know, like this wasn't his daddy's strip joint out on the innerstate so he'd better not act like it. And he gave me a look back like it wasn't my daddy's church, so he could do what he wanted.

Ms. Singer then proceeds to pass out a bunch of condoms from her purse ... I declare, that thing was a regular condomcopia! I dint know what she'd pull out of that bag after that ... and I dint want to know. So then she starts to show us how to put a us how to put a condom on the cucumber.

"Now you try it," she says.

And of course, Stevie Richards couldn't help but crack, "So every time I have sex with my girlfriend I should put a condom on a cucumber?" (As if Stevie Richards even had a girlfriend!) "But what if they're out of season? Then what do I do?"

Stupid, but it was a funny enough idea that of course, everybody laughed and Ms. Singer stood there like this was one of the trials she had to endure spreading her gospel to the masses -- her gospel of unproductive, safe, and joy-yus sex.

Then she's called away to the office on some business or t'other, but before she goes, she pulls out of her purse all sorts of long vegetables and fruit, like a plastic banana and a Italian squash and an eggplant even a warty little pickle, and she tells us to practice.

I couldn't help it --- sometimes I'm so bad -- but as soon as she's out the door, I hold up that little

shriveled pickle for everybody to see and said in a loud clear voice, "Hey, Stevie, this look familiar?"

Everybody laughed and you could tell it stung. He tried to come back with, "You should know. You were sucking it last night." But I'd got him, and nobody paid attention to what he said.

I saw the boys gathering together talking real excited like and then they showed the class what they'd been doing. They'd blown up a couple condoms and tied them to the bottom of the banana plastic, so it looked like a ... well, you know what with two big round blown up balloons on the side, and then they said, "Everybody bring everything back," and they arranged everything on the desk for Ms. Singer.

"It needs something," Stevie said. "We need something else."

And Loopey blurts out, "Angel's got some hand lotion!"

"No!" I say, my face goin' all red because I know what she's thinkin' of, but everybody's having so much fun with it that I have to hand my plastic squeeze bottle over to Stevie, and he and he squirts the ivory white lotion all over the all over the end of the banana.

And then Ms. Singer comes back in, there on the desk was the banana with two huge condom balls on either side of it and my pearly white hand lotion oozing from its tip and dropping on the floor, and Stevie Richards calls out, "Ms. Singer we tried putting the condoms on but we were too late! Does

that mean we're going to have a bunch of little bananas!"

"Who did this! Who did this?" Singer screamed liked we'd tromped on the body of Jeezus Christ hisself. "You! you!" she shrieked, and I wasn't quite sure whether she was pointin' out all the different boys or just couldn't think of anything else to stay ... like she was stuck in one gear. She staggered stiff legged down the aisle pointing her finger of accusation at Stevie Richards. "Get out, just get out!"

You sending us to detention?" He was just smirking at her. "For what? We were just doing what you told us to."

"I don't care where you go, just go! Just get out of here, you ... you ... boys!" (And the way she said it, like it was the most dirtiest word she could think of.)

Stevie liked that idea ... he'd been acting a darn fool all class long, and now he gets out early for it. I could see him thinking, Let's try that in old Mrs. Cannon's class. (Yeah, I thought, just let him try. U see Miz Cannon was a mean old lady. She wore a black glove over a wooden hand, and she'd been in the war, though I'm not sure which once, and wasn't 'bout to take no nonsense from the likes of Stevie Richards.)

After the boys left, Maggie Singer collects herself and says to the rest of us, "Girls gather round here."

“Yes, Ms. Singer,” Elizabeth Small said in her usual butt kissing singsong voice. (If you might could tell I don’t have much use for Elizabeth Small, not after the way she backstabbed me back in the seventh grade with Bobby Kincaid, not that he’s a boy a body’d want to bring home, but that’s another story.)

“No, I want you to call me Maggie. Because I’m just a girl like just like you.” The girls held their tongues. After all, we weren’t trapped in no time warp like she was, wearing flat-heeled Birkenstocks withouten socks and carrying one of them woven purses from Guatemala or Honduras or some such place where the old women sit round and weave and spit beetle juice all day long, and a granny dress that she could’ve swiped off some blissed out druggie at a Grateful Dead concert. But since as she dint mean nothing by the comment and she’d brought us bread cookies, even if they was pornographic, none of the girls dint say nothin.

“Yes, Miss ... Maggie,” Elizabeth Small said.

So Maggie – I know it don’t sound right calling a teacher by her first name, but after all, how could you call a body Miss or Misses or even Miz who went around putting prophylaxatives on vegetable produce? – she said, “Now, I’m going to tell you something. And it’s very important and it’s just as well that the boys aren’t here, because this is for you -- you women...” (even tho none of us weren't more n 16)... "because you are women, you're not girls any longer."

And here it got to be like a speech out of Little Women, but not no Little Women I ever read in school.

“First of all, you have to always keep in mind that your right to sexual expression is inviolable. You have the right to express yourselves in whatever way you decide, in whatever way seems most fitting for you; and you have the right not to have anybody take that expression or your pleasure from that expression away from you, not any man” -- and this she said like a dirty word, or something, something she had to spit out of her mouth like she’d found a cockroach in her salad at Howie’s Barbeque out in West Columbia – “or unintended result of your actions.”

If anybody was unclear what she meant by unintended result, she ‘splained quick enough. “Because of society’s repression, and the influence of parents and so-called religious morality, too many girls enter womanhood ignorant of their own bodies. Consequently, when it comes time for them to express themselves in a normal, healthy, sexually mature way, young women are consumed with too guilt to truly experience the joy of sexual love.

“Also, because nobody in the patriarchal establishment has properly informed them how to practice safe sex, they get pregnant. Your decision not to continue with a pregnancy will be the most important decision you will ever make. Remember, a woman doesn't decide to end an unwanted pregnancy the way she decides she wants an ice

cream cone, or a capachino. She decides like an animal caught in a trap decides to gnaw its leg off to get out of the trap. If you feel that you aren't ready for giving up everything that you now are, for changing your life completely, for giving up all hopes of a career and a meaningful, productive life, and just being a breeding cow for the bourgeois capitalist machine. There are ways we can take care of it -- your situation. And it's this choice that defines you as women -- your ability and right to make this decision. The most important decision you'll ever make in your life. So you don't make it lightly. You make it seriously. But you make it.

"I know because it was for me, and I also know it's not an easy decision. and it's one which you'll remember your whole life, but it's a decision that confirms your status as women because only women can make this decision. I want each one of you take one of my cards, just in case you ever need help. Keep it with you, because after your sexual partner" -- and there was something about the way she said this, like two people just sorta shook hands and 'greed to partner up for a night like they was sharing a table at a restaurant, or somethin' -- "your parents, your community and your church have abandoned you -- and they will -- remember that I'm there for you."

So, she was walking up and down the aisle passing out her cards when she tripped over my bag back and out came tumbling my out my bottle of lotion, white goo oozin' from the noozle. She points

at me like I had a 666 tattooed on my forehead, like I was the An-Tea-Christ, or somethin'. And I'm thinking, she's just gonna totally blow it.

But her voice comes out low and cold. "It's girls like you ..." She stopped herself, like she was going to say something else but clamped down hard on her tongue and started all over again. "You don't take this with the seriousness it warrants."

She made a big point of putting down that card on my desk, like she was hammering the last nail on the cross. "I'm sure I'll be seeing you later," which she seemed to say with a look in her eye that 'minded me of the glinting of sunlight off a rifle sight across the valley, which dint make much sense to me at the time. "Now, get out of here."

Which meant, I sposed, Go to Detention.

Which is where I first met Abe, which I figger is kinda the point of the whole story I'm tellin you.

~ ~ ~

## a histry die-o-rama

I have this friend at school that I just love so much. She's so nice and kind an always thinking of other people (and I guess I'm thinking of me, because when I'm down at the mouth or feeling the blues, she's always there to say a cheerful word, and I guess I'm just being selfish to be thinking of myself, but I can't help it - it's just the way I am).

Anyway, her name is Guadalupe -- but we call her Loopey -- but she's not Spanish or anything,



she's as American as you or me – though with all the ill eagle aliens coming into the country these days that you see on the TV, I'm not so sure about you – but her people've been in this country for more'n a hundred years to, or more, even, maybe ... I'm not xactly sure, but however long it's been, it's been a long time, so I guess that qualifies for something, doesn't it?

Not that it would make any difference if she was Spanish, either. I was just saying, what if, cuz axeshually, she's more like half Puerto Rican an half Black, but ONE PER CENT MERICAN.

Anyways, Loopey's a tall girl, with big ol' hips – I guess you'd call her "full figured," if you was being nice -- and a peaked nose like a ski slope and a bright cheery face and eyes that bulge big when she smiles so she looks a little bit (well, a whole lot, if you want to know the truth) like Big Bird ('cept without the feathers and being yellow and all), bless her heart, and it's bad of me to say that, I know, but it' the godawful truth. But she is so sweet with big brown freckles on her cheeks sprinkled about her nose on her cheeks like milk-chocolate drops on a cake.

Anyway, when I got to detention there was Loopey. I sit down nex to her. The teacher'd put on a movie to keep us quiet an educate us all at the same time too. It was a video of what happened to Black people many years ago. How they was brought over here on slave ships and all and then worked to death in the swamps hereabouts and whipped for not

working themselves to death fast enough and the women raped and the families broke up ...

So, Loopey and me, we had to do a die-o-rama for this project in our history class – which at first I thought would be horrible, having something to do with dead people an all, or people dying or something like what you see in the movies, but then Loopey splained it to me, that it was just a little scene and we could put in it whatever we wanted about something that happened along time ago.

So I tol Loopey maybe we oughta do a die-o-rama bout the stuff they was showin in this movie, an that's when Stevie MacNab leaned over and said he'd really like to do a real die-o-rama on all them n-words (I can't bring myself to say it cuz its jus too mean an low-down). An I'm growing redder and redder like one of them cartoon characters almost fit to burst an i tol him he'd better shut his trap or i waz gonna do a die-o-rama on his face an i musta been shoutin pretty loud cuz thats when Mr. Larson come over an real soft like tells us to go back to our seats an sit down.

He turned on the lights, then an he started talkin bout how this wasn't a movie jus 'bout African people but the same story could be told all over the world time an time agin.

He axed Stevie Macnab, "Macnab. That's a Scottish name, isn't it?"

"I dunna know. I guess so."

"Well, do you know how your folks came here?"

"Yeah," he said with a big grin, "they move down from Spartanburg so my daddy could work in the mill."

"No, I mean, your first folks? The ones that came from Scotland?"

Stevie dint do nothing but shrug an made that sound that people make when they say "I don't know" but it dont come out like words or nothin, just a sound that goes up and down ... ah-ann-no.

"Well, Steven, it's something like this. Up in the Highlands of Scotland, where I would presume your people came from originally, your ancestors were cleared off their farms where they'd lived for close to a thousand years. Sometimes the little houses they had were burned over their heads. Just imagine that -- the women and children crying and the men not able to do anything because the government had already taken all their guns away from them."

Affer that, Stevie dint say nothin so Mr. Larson turned the movie back on an i whispered fierce to Loopey, "I'm so sorry, so awful, awful sorry you had to hear that igrant fool talking like that an see me acting so crazy like," but Loopey, she's such a wonderful person, always looking on the good side of things (unlike myself, who is just bad to the core, like you'll come to find out), and she says with this smile like an angel. She just says, "He can't help it. That's the way he was raised up. You have to take that into account. I know it doesn't have anything to do with you."

I swear, she's a pure-tee Angle.

An so I sat there in the study hall, watchin the movie an gripping Loopey's hand till my nails dug into her palm, tears wantin to come to my eyes cuz it was my people, jus like Stevie's, scarce a couple years out of having them terrbell things done to us, but that we turn around and do the same thing to Loopey's people, like we dint learn nothin from our trials n tribulashuns cept to do it to somebody else quick afore they get a chance to do it to us. Well, we're all god's children, they say, but you know what happens to a child that gets whapped ... more'n' likely he turns around and whups some other child.

But it made my heart cry, neverless.

~ ~ ~

dint meen nothin tall

Sometimes I go through the woods to get next door, like my granddaddy says, but now I'm going to tell you somethin' about Abe. (That's Abe Larson, the English teacher and detention hall supervisor.) My family won't appreciate me telling you about this – they think you oughta keep your mouth shut and not talk about any of the bad stuff. “Don't go hangin your soiled underwear out on the line,” my Granma Lucy Mae used to say.

She was a big one for these old sayings, along with her Bible verses. She'd have this little pack of cards shaped like a loaf of bread (actually, I guess it was a big pack), and each day she'd pull off a card from her "Daily Bread" (that's what they called it) and read a Bible verse. When I went over to visit, and later when I went to live there for a while because my mama dint want me around no more, she'd pull off a card for me every day, so she and I would sit at her kitchen table, the one with steel legs that were dotted with little brown rust dots, and a cold Formica top, so that on hot days it was a real pleasure to brush up against it or lay your cheek down on top of it.

An when she thought that I was in trouble, or in special need of Bible counseling (which was near all the time), she'd pull out an extra slice of Daily Bread, like "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," and we'd sit around and chew on that thought for a while, like how it means Jesus made Sunday a day of rest that we're not supposed to do nothing on but go to church and maybe stop off at the Waffle House on the way back.

But I got to reckonin my whole family done kinda tore up their parents' card after what they done to me and tried to do to my baby, so I don't much care what they think of me anymore, and if I'm hanging stained underwear out on the line, it's theirs, not mine.

Anywhos, after the whole shebang with Miz Antony, I was sitting in Detention Study Hall. It was a big ol' auditorium they covered the floor with these plastic mats and set up those little desk-chairs they make the kids sit in at school. Everyday they cleared us out at two-thirty and sent us home early cuz the basketball team started their practice at three, and I guess they figgered it was more important that the boys play their bouncey-ball than students that was havin' problems studyin' actually get any help.

But I dint mind going to Detention cuz I got to read and dint get in trouble for it, like I did when I red in class when the teacher was talkin' 'bout stuff that dint make much sense an' always used to yell at me for havin' my nose in a book, like read a book was the last blessed thing you'd want to do in school! Like it was bad or somethin.

So, I was readin' my book from English class – by some fellow named France Kafka, who weren't English, and not even American, so why we had to read him in English class, I don't know, except English class weren't really 'bout English at all, but more about Literature, you know, with a capital L.

A lot of times when I got to reading, I dint hear nothin' that was going on 'round me, which was one of the things that so ticked off my teachers cuz they'd be callin' out my name, and I'd just be in a world all my own but back on planet Earth the kids would be laughin' and gigglin' and wonderin' when I'd hear the teacher, till finally she'd come and stand

right over me and I'd hear this voice like comin' to me out of a dream ... which was the same way I heard Abe's voice say, "You think that's complicated in English, you should try it in German."

And I look up and there was Abe. I recognized him. He was a new English teacher at the school (tho i dint have him for any of my classes), an he wore his hair in a pony tail at the back – only it wasn't girly like some fellows have, but just kinda matter of fact. He'd moved in from California, I'd heard (which explained a lot), though how on earth he got here from there and more important, why, that's what I couldn't figure out – until later he told me: A girl, of course. They'd been together out there, and then broke up, and then he'd followed her back to try to make things up with her. "More like Comedy of Errors than The Trial," he joked. "But a little of that, too."

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

So, he was standing there talking to me about how Kafka's sentences are much longer in German, and how the language kinda snakes together, only he dint say it like that -- he said intertwine, like I spose you have a big ball of string an its all tangled up like, with the pieces goin inter and outer each other and you cant quite get them all unbunched up. An' he said how even though this Kafka fella wasn't exactly successful, like a best-seller Vampire cereal or nothing, Kafka had perfectly realized his genius, that is, the part of him that was special and uniquest in all the world, and that it wasn't right to think

of him as a nutcase, because what he was doing was exploring the unconscious like Freud was too at the same time.

An we was talking about all this stuff in the middle of Detention Study Hall on a suffering hot afternoon in May like it was the naturalist thing in the world -- which it was, for me, with Abe anyway, though I reckon we kinda stood out, with kids smackin' gum, talkin' on their cell phones, an' a couple nuzzlin' each other across from me (how two of 'em fit into a single desk I sure don't know!), or jes sleepin' on their desks waitin' for their time to be up.

"It's not complicated at all," I told him (not trying to be smart-alecky but just talking to him). "It's so sad. So real. It makes my world look normal"

This made him smile. "If you want to see what his life was like, you should read "Brief an dem Vater."

"What?"

"Sorry. I'm showing off my high school German. It's "Letter to His Father."

"You read Kafka in German!" I guess my eyes grew a little big. I ain't never knowed anybody who spoke a Foreign language, 'cept little Tommy Franks who use to talk Pig Latin.

"Not any more," he said. "It's fading fast. Use it or lose it," he said. "Like a lot of other things." There was a tinge of sadness in his voice then, like he wanted to say something, maybe wished he could say it, but knew he shouldn't and wouldn't. Instead, he smiled. "Oh, well," he said, like I'd just walked in



on him in the shower or something and caught him o nature ale, like they say.

And then, not the least bit embarrassed, but that I just wasn't meant to see him like that, it was like he closed the door, but soft so as not to be rude. "Nice talking to you," he said, the funny thing was, like he meant it. "See you later," like it was some sort of date, or something, which it wasn't. It was jes detention study Hall and dint meen nothin at all.

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## The metaphorical waffle house

You know how when you first learn something ... like a new word or somethin' ... all of a sudden you start seein' it all over the place. It's kinda that way with people too, sometimes. You meet somebody new, and all of a sudden you can't turn a corner withouten bumpin' into 'em.

If you've never been to a Waffle House, they're little hidey-holes diners tucked away on the sides of roads and highways out Carolina way. Anyway, we was on way back from church one Sunday, when Mama and Peter decided we'd take us a little brunch as they call it (I guess since they can't figure out whether it's breakfast or lunch, so they sorta mix the two words together).

Sitting in the booth across from them two, I wasn't paying much attention to my mama and Peter. Not that I meant any disrespect, but they were mostly just talking about stuff that grown people seem to think is awful important but that dint mean nothing to me – I don't know, like, whether the new ministration in Washington was going to make a left turn or a right turn or go right down the center of the road, and how a whole lot depended on them making the right choice, right from the git-go, or something, or else we was all gonna go off into the ditch, or somethin'.

I was just reading my book (not the one assigned by my English teacher but another one I picked outta the liberry for myself) and dint even notice when they left the table. Mama, she went to the ladies' room, and I guess Peter stood up to go outside and smoke his pipe – he was a terribly sophisticated Piscopal minister, with a college degree and all, and liked to hang out in front of buildings smoking his pipe to demonstrate just how sophisticated he was.

And that's when this voice floated into my hearing like a sound out of a dream ... jes' like I told you afore, I get awful concentrated on my reading. "Whenever I see you, you're reading something."

I looked up and there was Abe, looking down at me with a crooked little smile on his lips. In fact, he looked at me so hard then, like he saw something, and I moved my hand to brush a piece of waffle off my face that I though might've got stuck there.

We was staring at each other – it seemed like time stretched out till it had no end – when my mama come back from the washroom, and I introduce Abe, only I dint say Abe, I said, "Mr. Larson, a new teacher at school," and my mama said very glad to meet you, I'm sure, like he was only a teacher and dint count for much, and she give him a little sideways glance like she couldn't figure out how a black fella got to be teaching at a all white Chrissean school, but all the while pretending to be gracious and friendly like, so cool that Granma Bettylou's lemon merange wouldn't melt in her mouth.

(I dont know if I mentioned that part afore - the part about Abe being black -- an when I say black, I mean real black, not just milk-chocolate black kinda black, but black-black -- black as a coal mine on the darkest night; black as a banker's heart, like my grandaddy usta say, but that's a nother story).

But Abe dint take no a fence. He just smiled back at Mama and said, "Delighted to meet you, too, ma'am," only like he meant it. Which i guess made me like him even more right there on the spot.

You see, I wasn't getting on too well with my mama around then. After the divorce between her and my daddy, she started not being around much but was saying things like she had to discover who she was, and she had to find herself.

The funny thing is wherever anybody starts talking about finding themselves, that always means

they're going to be running up and down the road looking, like their selves that they want to find so bad is somewhere else than where they are right now.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, things was pretty lonely at home, and I took to staying at school a lot., and after Study Hall closed, going over to the Waffle House to sit and read and hang out, jes' so I wouldn't have to go home cuz it was awful depressing there, to come home to an empty house - - it's funny how cold an empty house can feel no matter how steamy the weather is outside - with nothing more cheery than a note on the fridge:

Had to go out. Dinners in freezer.

Do your homework.

YOUR MOTHER.

(An that "your mother" usta bother me terrible. Like it was an official title or somethin. Not like we was related but like it was an ficial title or somethin -- a job description, and not a job she was particularly partial to neither.)

Weren't nothin to keep me at home, so for a little bit of time i dint have nowhere else to go but the Waffle House. An as it turns out, that's where Abe would go, too, after school or in the evenings. At first, i spose it was that there weren't no where else to go in McCaulleyville, but then it got to the point

that it was the only place each one of us (me and Abe, I mean) knew the other knew, because for the longest time, we'd pretend like our meeting there was by accident.

(I'm probly gettin ahead of myself here, lookin' back an reflectin, but thats how it seems to me now, thinkin bout it.)

After school I'd go over and sit just, one of them waffles from Belgium and a cup of coffee in front of me (Mama said I was too young to be drinking coffee, but I figured she was too old be acting like a teenager, so I guess that made us even), doing my homework or reading or talking with the regulars, like there was Mr. Schmooks.

He owned a farm about 5 miles out of town and was always talking about expanding, catching the next wave of food production, he called it – like capybaras (I had to look up the spelling to get it right), which was what they had for rats down there in South America, or the kind of slugs they ate over in Africa someplace (I think they were banana slugs, but whether it because they looked like bananas, or tasted like bananas, or they ate bananas, I forget), or ostriches, or Buffalo. He said he figgered he would be on the cutting edge of agricultural innovation. Them's his exact words. I told him I might could see myself trying a buffalo burger, since it was mostly like a cow, anyway, but no way was I going to eat a rat from South America or anyplace else, no matter what you called it.

So I'd be talking to him, or to Ashley, the girl that worked the afternoon shift mostly – she'd quit high school the year before to get married and have her baby, and now she and her husband lived in a trailer out on Pickens Street. It was real nice. I been there once when she took me home once after her work let off and she had to stop off first to check on the baby. Her husband – his name was Laurence – was getting ready to go out on a construction job to North Carolina. But the trailer was a double wide, with two bedrooms and a little kitchen and living room ... just like a real house, only smaller.

But all the time that I was talking or reading or doing my home work, I was really just waiting for him. Abe, I mean. Only, I might not have known it myself, or admitted it. But that's what I was doing. I'd been going almost a week after that time I seen him with my mama and was getting quite a coffee jag going and had put on a couple pounds, what with the waffles every afternoon, all the time thinking in the back of my mind – which I wouldn't of admitted at the time – that maybe if he'd come once, he'd come again, and when he finally did show up, it was like I'd been holdin' my breath the whole time. The minute he walked in, I stopped talking to whoever it was I was talking to – I couldn't tell you who it was even if you put a gun to my head and got real quiet like when you're feeding a squirrel out of your hand and you don't want to scare it away.

"Hi, Angel," he said, and I know that don't sound too clever, it's not like in the movies or

nothing where people say all sorts of funny and interesting stuff, but for us, it was just “Hi,” and “Hi” back to him, and he just sort of stood there, and I sat there, like a couple of chickens too dumb to even cluck, and then he says, “What’re you reading today?” and makes to turn over the cover of my book. Only my hand was on the book, see, and in doing that, he touched my hand, and I must’ve jumped like a stray dog when you reach out to pet it, and he looked at me real startled like, and I looked at him, and I guess that was our “moment,” like they talk about in movies – only our moment was him scaring the piss outta me, so I near left a puddle in the booth and him shocking me like with one of them Taser guns the police got ol’ Willie Marshall with one Saturday night when he got on a drunk an’ wouldn’t stop screamin’ ‘bout it weren’t closing time on account they’d just set the clocks back and he’d got one more hour to get drunk (as if the fool he weren’t drunk enough already), and finally Officer Wagner got fed up with talkin’ to the idiot, and zapped him. It dint hurt him much and sure dint put him off his drinkin’, but after that, Willie couldn’t see a light go on withouten jumpin’ near a foot, it ‘minded him so of getting lit up like a neon Pabst Blue Ribbon sign.

That’s what it was for us, and we both knew, though we dint talk about it, not yet, at least.

He read the cover. “Plath,” he said with a choke in his voice and kind of a false start -- he had

to clear his throat before he could get it all out at once.

"Our teacher says its too depressing, on account she committed soeyside, but I don't think so."

He started to laugh but stopped when he saw the look on my face. "I'm not laughing at you," he said, reaching out to touch me again. The electricity was still there, but this time we was expecting it, so we dint jump so.

He took up the book and flipped through it, like he was looking for something that he knew would be there. "Here ... here's poetry in action."

He'd turned to a poem called "Metaphors," where Sylvia talks about being " a riddle in nine syllables." He showed it to me. "It actually goes back to medieval riddle ballads, but it's a fine demonstration of a poet's different ways of looking at things. Ways of seeing that aren't obvious to the rest of us."

"That's easy," I said, taking the book back. I read the last couple lines:

I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

"She's pregnant," i sez, like it was the most obviousest thing in the world.

I shuffled the pages and come to a stop at one page in particular and pointed. "I like this one." I



dint read it myself, but handed it to him, partly cuz, I think now, I wanted to hear how he read it.

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:  
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:  
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you'd return the way you said,  
But I grow old and I forget your name.  
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

"Do you know what that means?"

"Mr. Larson," I said. "You might think we's semi-literate trailer trash down here, but we ain't completely stupid. Yes, I know what it means. Fires of love burn out, and comes a time, we forget what got us all hot an bothered, and maybe it was all just a lusion anyway." I said this with some heat, like I was fended, which I was, kinda.

"Sorry, I dint mean that how it sounded," he splained. "It was the English instructor coming out. You'll have to excuse me. Please." He nodded in the direction of the couple waffle plates. "Your friend coming back?"

I wasn't going to tell him that I weren't with nobody, on account of he'd make me out to be some sort of pure-tee pig, wallowing in the waffle trough, so I just shook my head and looked in my book awful hard, like I was interested in something there, hoping he wouldn't see me get all red. Fortunately, he was turning to Ashley and asking her for a cup of

coffee, and when he turned back, his eyes were on the book, not on me, so I guess I dodged that one.

"Don't laugh at me," I told him. "You're older than I am. Your brain's bigger than mine."

He just smiled at me, the warmest, most kindest smile I ever seen, and I liked him even more, if that was possible. "I don't ever laugh at you," he said, and we took to talking till way after dark, about all sorts of stuff that came to us -- about my studies at school, and about the world, and about what was going on with us -- not like "us" us ... but about what was going on in our lives, general like.

While we was talking, he'd be looking for opportunities to touch me, like to empathize a point, he'd reach out and touch my hand in the scarest way, like a cat inching forward and pulling back, and the softest kind of touch, fainter than a mosquito landing.

Then, out of no where, I asked him why he'd broke up with his girlfriend.

"I was kind of an asshole," he said.

I couldn't imagine it and told him so, he seemed to be the sweetest, gentlest person you could imagine, not like all the hicks around McCauleysville, bless their hearts. I mean the level of culture around here was that their idea of littersure was watching Leonardo Dicaprio in his Romeo and Juliet movie.

But the weird thing was, his saying that he'd been wrong -- and from the tone of his voice, that he was sorry -- made me like him even more.

So I have to admit, after that day, I took to sitting by the front window of the Waffle House, and every day he'd come in, like for a cup of coffee, or a strawberry waffle, or something, and we'd meet like by accident -- as if -- and talk till Ashley kicked us out. An it was all so innocent like we dint know what we was doin. We was just two flies caught in the syrup. (Which sounds like a lie, I know, but its really the godawful truth).

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### *kissing leads to prosintuition*

If I had been just been raised in a Baptist home it would be easier for me. I went to Baptist schools but a non denominational church, an sometimes the other way roun -- Baptist churches an nondemonizational schools, or even worse -- public. Except Summers when I'd go to my Granddad's church. Skirts, no jeans, no music, no nail polish, no dancing, no spongebob, never ever go to movies, an above all else -- no asking why. In my home with my mom, Dad wasn't there most of the time, he was out ministrin so he dint make make any rules, least none that we had ta follow, so I mostly tried to figure stuff out for myself.

I was encouraged to question everything. I remember BEFORE school started every morning

we would get 4 different newspapers and go through the current events. The Mom would read the articles and then ask what I thought, as soon as I gave my opinion she'd give me an argument against it, then I'd change my mind and she'd change hers. She said she was teaching me to think for myself and defend out beleafs (and she did like to argue, so I got a lot of practice). Sadly this did not always serve me well in my very conservative school.

Richard finished his summer intern down in Norlans, so we are talking 5 times a day on the phone-and for hours on the net because, tryin to figure out what happened last time I went to visit him (during the time of Hurricane Ofeelyah). He is back home which means we are in the same time zone. When he is at collage he is awful busy so its harder. He has more time on his hands to remind me of my faults. Ha!

I told him I am using our different views on marriage for my English essay. He thinks it's funny because he sists the Bible is the only TRUE way. First, the man is the leader of the family an cant nothin be said against him. That's called "challenging the thority of a man."

When I was in third grade, Bobby Joe Gillbrady said somethin in math class that was jus so stupid I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I shot my hand up. "Miz Cannon!" I musta near shouted. "Bobby Joe dont know what he's talkin' bout. 23 times 44 is one thousand twelve." (An it was. An still is, too.)

But stead of being praised for being right, Miz Cannon laid into me for (you guessed it) "challenging the thority of a man" (even tho Bobby Joe wernt but 8 years old, an a pretty sorry scuse for an 8-year-old, even).

That's how I know what number 1 is for Richard the THIRD. Marriage is a higher archy, with the man on top. The woman ain't loud to say peep to her husband else she's guilty of rebellion.

Number 2 rule is spare the rod, spoil the wife. You see, all sin is the fault of EVE. Cuz she's the one that ate the apple and then tempted ADAM(I guess I could mention the WHORE OF BABYLON here too cuz she's jus nother example of IMMODEST womanhood tempting pure-minded men) and this apple eatin let all the sin into the world -- why peoples got to sweat to earn their daily bread, why wimins got so much trouble when their birthin babies, and why snakes bite at our heels, so if somethin goes wrong in the family, or the husband strays, or his wife talks back to him, its the wife's fault cuz GOD put Man over her, so, the husband is shirking his duty if he lets his woman challenge his thority or be bellious. Its his GOD-given job to DISCIPLINE his famly.

But how Richard the THIRD splains it, it's not beatin or hittin wimin an childrin that he's talkin' about, just CHASTISING. With the Rod. That's different though i ain't zactly clear myself how.

Number 3 is no sex before getting married. That college he went to dont even allow boys and

girls to hold hands. Hells bells! (Scuse my language.) They don't even allow boys an girls to look in each other's eyes. Eye Fornication is what they call it. Nuff said.

Number 4 is no sex even after your married less your tryin to have a baby. (An even then its only okay if you dont joy yourself.) An Richard says in the beginnin of our marriage, he'll be so busy and workin so hard to make a FOUNDATION on a ROCK for us (stead of shifting sands like it warns against in the bible, course), that we wont be able to start a famly for near ten years, so that means ... i dont have to tell you.

Tho I'm not sure that sounds natural or not.

But that's what we were talkin bout all this time, his point being that what happened in Norlans couldn't be happenin no more. A preacher's wife cant be communicatin with frogs and butterflies an other ungodly critters an jumpin in the water with all her clothes on.

"So next time i oughta take em all off?" I axed.

Which he dint think was too funny.

Here's the last conversation we had (I'm AL -- for Angel-Louise, and RBIII - is, you gessed it -- Richard the Third):

AL (9:02:04 PM): i just wrote another english paper about you.... i only got a 95%, my english professor said you sounded unbelievable... so dedicated ... and now this?! .....

RBIII(9:02:39 PM): wait !!!!!

RBIII(9:02:47 PM): I sounded a little unbelievable?

AL (9:02:47 PM): First there's the facts that you do not swim, ride a bike, fly a kite or celebrate christmas or even your birthday because it is to much work,won't boat,no pets ever, (besides me ) you won't talk on the phone, mail letters,go to movies,dance,go to fairs, hug your Dad,go to concerts... atleast for a big sum of your life thus far....

RBIII(9:02:57 PM): wait

AL (9:03:00 PM): wait, there's more!

RBIII(9:03:01 PM): I can (sort of) swim now

RBIII(9:03:22 PM): so wait

RBIII(9:03:25 PM): when why only 95% ,what did you do wrong?

AL (9:03:57 PM): I also mentioned all of the universities that you got accepted into... yale, stanford, NC university, hooters bartending academy, duke, and almost harvard.....

RBIII(9:04:21 PM): lol

AL (9:04:55) But the one you went to was Cavalry Bible College and the part that sounds MOST unreal of you is...

AL (9:06:14 PM): you've never kissed me, but still You want to marry me ..... an when i explain your wantin to keep your temple pure and your idea that kissing leads to fornication which leads to prostuition my professor said you sound like someone out of a tennessee williams play...

RBIII(9:06:26 PM): who's this english professor you're always talking about?

AL (9:07:01 PM): just a teacher at school i talk to some times ... he's very smart & has written a book himself ,so maybe he has insight into a warped mind...

RBIII(9:07:34 PM): all the time more like.

AL (9:07:01 PM): find a girl

RBIII(9:07:17 PM): dang

AL (9:07:20 PM): What about New Years- can't you grab someone ?

RBIII(9:07:21 PM): that was brutal

RBIII(9:07:27 PM): and I am very picky

RBIII(9:30:14 PM): besides

RBIII(9:30:30 PM): Girls won't talk to me at parties unless I drink or fake it

AL (9:32:29 PM): annyywaaaay my english professor says i have a book in me and he is willing to help me...and he's brilliant...so..... you should be happy about that..... ...say "yippppee! go Angelees!" .....or at least think it...

RBIII (9:33:12 PM): you're talking an awful lot with him ...

AL (9:43:20 PM): You r supposed to say:"Yes Angelees ! I KNOW you have a book in you- you can do anything, Blah,blah, blah....."

RBIII (9:44:39 PM): is that what your professor says?

Also You don't have to fake drink, or fake do cocaine, or do anything fake---be yourself kiss or don't kiss who you want....Just learn to be happy ...



When was the last time you wrote something you loved ? Look at the big picture you have this huge list that gets bigger each week of things you won't do because it is evil or a sin. I worry about us being in the same state. Together we are toxic. I don't want to ruin our friendship- but I will drive you nuts. What can I say to make Richard the third comfortable with Richard the third?

RBIII(10:48:16 PM): using my own logic against me I see

AL (11:08:54 PM): You are 21 , You have your life planed down to your kids names and the toothpaste you will use 20 year from now. By the time you graduate you would have found a perfect girl to bear you 2.5 perfect kids, you'll have a flealess dog named spot. I will be the good "Auntie " that comes around and takes your kids out for cotton candy- your wife will hate me because I'm a flake. You'll make excuses for me but Richard #4 and Little Jamie will love me. You'll have white sofas and white walls

RBIII(11:09:36 PM): Wow that is depressing as hell! Kill me now!

AL (11:10:18 PM): You will have a beautiful life ahead of you ,because you won't let it be any other way then tidy and neat, neat and tidy and you'll find some perfect litel wife who'll lead your church bible study an not go rescuing frogs and butterflies ...

RBIII (11:12:24 PM): i don't want a perfect littel wife

AL (11:16:42 PM): well you dont want me  
for my algebra skills

AL (11:16:54 PM): you dont care that i like  
poetry

AL (11:17:40 PM): or that i got a 100% on  
my economy midterm

AL (11:31:13 PM): I have to edit my paper  
before Sunday. I'll have to include your whole  
kissing leads to prostitution idea. I need to get an A  
so I can live a productive life

AL (11:31:19) and your gonna get married  
and yur whol familys gonna be perfect ... tall with  
straight teeth an all of you blond haird ... an u an yur  
wife r gonna be virgins till your 35 an ready for  
children ... an your gonna pop em out out cording to  
skedule 123 an then thats gonna be it ...

AL (11:32:32) thats yur life, not the life for  
me

RBIII(11:36:19 PM): You're tired. You're not  
making much sense. I'll talk to you later. night dear  
...

AL (11:39:31 PM): goodbye dear

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*forgive them that does wrong unto you*

After my mom and dad decided to get their  
divorce, my mom up and got it into her head that  
she'd be better off going to her own church, not the  
one that my daddy was preaching at. So, she took to

driving over to Camden where there was a Piscopal church. I went there sometimes when there weren't nothing better to do, not that I minded going to church on Sunday ... it sure was a lot easier than sitting around swatting flies on a summer afternoon. This Piscopal church was a tall building made out of red brick with a big clock in the middle of its spire, when they had a bell up at the top. The Piscopals dint ring the bell none, though, like as they thought it would be rude to remind folks that was already coming that it was time to go to church, and in bad taste to upbrade folks that had no intention of coming no matter how much they clanged the bell. So the building just sat quiet like at the side of the town square, not overly large but set back a ways from the road.

They had the best music of all the churches I'd ever gone to, except the black churches, but that was a different kind of music, being gospel and all. The Fundamentals dint really believe in music or dancin' or anything (there was a joke 'bout how come Fundamentals don't make love standin' up – somebody might think they're dancin'!), and the Methodists kinda clanged away at a broken piano and sawed their voices; the Africo-American folks at my friend Loopey's church raised their voices like they was trying to reach up to god, and the Piscopalians sat quietly kinda swooning to the glory of the harps a chord music.

After my mama was going to the new church for a short bit, the Piscopal minister got to calling up

at our home, wanting to know if my mama is there. Sometimes Daddy would answer and the Piscopal minister – I guess I should let you know his name; it was Peter, and he was cool as a pitcher of lemonade on a summer day.

Well, he would just ask to talk to Mama, like it was church business or something. I guess my mama splained the situation to as well as could be.

My daddy'd been cheatin', and they were in the process of gettin a divorce, but it was a long road to go -- being entangled with lawyers, and a kid, and years of habit and my daddy being a relatively shiftless sort, notwithstanding he was a Minister. "A Fundamental," Peter would sniff, letting on that he dint think too high of the breed, but in the meantime, my mama'd let on, she was free to do what she liked, including talking to her minister into the wee hours of the morning.

And talk they did. Just listening to the words you'd think they was just talking about choice of music in the program the coming Sunday, whether they should open with God's Glory, or tune by Mozert they been practicing, but underneath, any fool that was paying attention coulda heard there was something in my mama's voice that told of somethin' else goin' on. I guess it says something about my daddy that he dint hear nothing.

One rule my mama had, since they was splitting up, was my daddy wasn't loud in her new church. But nevertheless, he came by one Sunday afore services to pick me up – leastwise, that's what he

said – but whether it was cuz he forgot or just outta pure cucesdness, I don't know. But when he drove up, there was my mama and Peter out on the front lawn greeting the flock like they was already Mr. and Mrs. Piscopal Minister. I saw my daddy sitting there in his car across the road, a long big finned pink Buick. He was gripping the steering wheel like he was strangling it.

Mama had earned the car from selling cosmetics to ladies in the county, and it kinda stood out in a crowd. I could see him talking to hissself. He stared hard enough to drill a hole for a few minutes. The smile on my mama's face was like he hadn't seen in years, not that he'd spent much time lookin' at it in the first place. It looked like my daddy couldn't hardly contain himself.

There was Mama and Peter greeting the church ladies like they was husband and wife (when you thinking about it what business did Mama have standing next to the Piscopal minister shaking hands with the congregation?) leaning into him from time to time, in that real familiar way that people have when they're in public and they can't really show how they feel, and my Daddy talking up a storm to hissself across the way -- talking and pounding the wheel and just generally working himself into a frenzy. I half expected the windows to splode, he seemed to be getting so hot.

Mama had already told him not to come by the church. That was her church, she'd told him. He

dint have no business there. And now my daddy was seeing why Mama dint want him comin' by.

Cuz when all the congregation had left, and Mama and Peter were alone in the middle of the lawn in front of that Piscopal church (not really alone, but you know what I mean, alone in a crowd, as no one was looking at them or paying them no mind), Mama, she stood on tippy toes up to Peter and gave him a kiss on the lips, and the two of them beamed at each other like they was two grinning monkeys (which aint probably the best analogy in the world, but the best one I could come up with as the baby's gonna be waking up soon).

When my Daddy sees that kiss, he grabbed that wheel and shook it till the whole car was shaking. He must've be screaming something terrible from the look on him, but the funny thing was no one could hear him on account that all the windows were rolled up, so it was like watching a movie that the sound had been turned off on. You could see somebody carrying on something terrible but couldn't hear nothing they was saying.

Then the Buick door pops open and Daddy, he don't saunter over like folks do when they're coming to church, he's rushing like a crazed dog that got wind of some other dog sniffin' round his bone. His face is all red and his teeth are clenched and his fists are all knotted up and he otherwise looks like a wild person.

He looks like he tried to get ready for church but seemed to have had some difficulty at it. His tie's

looped over one of his button downs of his button downs of his collar, and his hair is parted one way over half his head and another way over the other half, and his shirt is half tucked in and his socks don't match.

I swear, I don't know what catches my breath more, the fact that he's charging like a mad dog across the lawn or that he's dressed like a somebody whose just escaped from the insane asylum. All the rest of the congregation has gone inside and its just Mama and Peter on the lawn and they don't see Daddy comin like a mad bull.

I say, "Mama," and she turns to me. "What is it, Angel-Louise," she says (most mothers, they'd say something like "honey" or "darling" but my mother never called me known of them pet names; I guess she figured "Angel-Louise" was pet name enough for the both of us).

So she turns to me and with a little irritation in her voice from my having interrupting her tettytet with Peter, "What is it?" but all I can do is stare at this crazy man who's now not 10 yards away from us. My mama must've seen my look, cuz right at the last moment, she turns to see Daddy just before he goes plowing into them both. He's aiming for Peter, I guess, but his aim ain't that good, cuz he kinda sweeps Mama up in his general charge and they all go down, Mama shrieking his name, "Luther! What's come over you? You gone crazy? Stop it?"

Peter is totally discombobulated, he doesn't know what is happening sept – well, he has an idea

of what is happening but not any real idea why – he’s under this pile of bodies and this crazy man is swinging his fists like a windmill. I guess it was fortunate that my daddy dint know nothing bout fighting, because he was bout as effective in that department as laundry flapping on a line in the wind. He was swinging hard as a boxing champ but wasn’t connecting with much besides the air and the ground a couple times. All the while Peter was exhorting him to “Compose yourself. Get a hold of yourself. Behave decently. This is a church, man!”

At this time, some members of the congregation had peeked out the door and seen what was goin on. The ladies stood there with their hands over their mouths, white gloves over their mouths like they couldn’t say what they wanted to say, and several of the fellows pushed through like they was coming up on a pack of fighting dogs, though if truth be told, only one of them dogs was fighting, and he wasn’t doing much damage. They pulled my daddy off of them -- my mama and Peter -- and helped them up off the ground, all the while my daddy was calling my mama all sorts of horrible names like Chippie, and Harlot an’ Jezebel – I guess it’s funny to listen to a preacher swear on account they don’t get much practice – and my mama was laying into him about breaking their ‘straining’ order and how he was a crazy man and lettin out a much more colorful stream of swear words, which she was a lot better at than him on account she weren’t no



preacher and had had a lot of practice all the years they'd been married.

They was standing there shouting at each other, covered in grass clippings when Peter comes up and takes my Mama by the shoulders and tells her they need to go inside and pray, and he tells that to the entire congregation, and he add vises my daddy to go to his church and pray and ask forgiveness for breaking the piece of the Sabbath.

The big fellows in Peter's congregation help Daddy to his car by lifting him by the elbows and droppin' him inside, and it's then that Mama breaks down crying 'bout how difficult it was, and how she was so shamed, and then all the church ladies come up to her and smother her with a fluttering of white-gloved hands prettying her up and pulling the grass off of her hair, and smoothing out her dress and generally telling her this wernt no doing of hers.

Then they went inside, leaving me on the lawn, and I look across at Daddy, and he's wiping grass and from his face looking for all the world like a dog that's been shut out doors -- what I want to say is -- sad and lonely, and wanting so much to be a part of what's going on inside. I want to go up to him and put my hand in his like we usta when I was little, walking to church together, all of us, the family together, but I couldn't because Mama had a grip on my hand like an alligator cramp, and my daddy, he got in into that ol' pink Buick and drove away.

So I went inside Peter's church and listened to the music that should of made my heart swell up

to God, but dint. On the contrary, it just made me feel sadder and bluer than I was before; and I listened to the sermon that Peter delivered which that was "Forgive those that do wrong unto you," but as I sat there next to Mama I could sense there weren't no forgiveness in her heart for what my Daddy done, but just coldness and a hardness of her heart gainst him.

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### some tears

I got a favorite picture of my Granma. I was trying to hug her and she said not to hug her too close cause I'd mess up her hair. We were in a restaurant, and I ordered French fries and was pouring ketchup on them when she saw it was Heinz brand, so she called the waiter over and demanded American ketchup. He dint what she was talking about, so she explained it real slow to him. Cording to my Granma that Kerry lady that was married to Heinz Ketchup but now's married to Kerry -- that's the fellow that was running for president -- "well, he's a libel, and that means so's his wife, so if I use this ketchup, i might as well be communist too!"

But the waiter said the place only had Heinz ketchup so she had him take my order and bring back brand new fries. When he comes back he says,

"Here are your freedom fries Ma'am." He kept looking around. I think he thought there was a hidden camera, and he was on a reality show.

I do have a fear of not living worthy.

My grandfather died on a Tuesday, i know because i would often go back with him when he made the trip down to see me & come back home.

My granddad was 1 of 9. He was the baby of the family with sisters and one older brother. His brother john died in new jersey that morning, so he was going to preach at his own church's Wednesday service and then go to new Jersey to preach at his brother's funeral after wards.

He was countinplating the ways things used to be, not sad, but real mellow, and we had a nice talk about his life growing up, and the way it feels to be 70 and have all of your sisters and brothers die already, and he gave me this great speech about i shouldn't be so shy.

I know in part My Granma is mad because she was going to come down with him but she changed her mind, cuz she was ticked off at me since I skipped Thanksgiving. She has said if she had been in the car she might have alerted him to the fact that the 18 wheeler was speeding down on him.

Or at least died with him.

At the funeral i got this feeling that my granma kinda blamed me but when you actually hear the words they hang there over every conversation we had ever since.

Time stopped at her house. Christmas decorations are up in places just like they was when my granpa came down to visit. She won't change the calendars or wash the coffee cup that he left on the counter. I know she yelled at him to wash it himself - the way she always did -- and in spite she dint touch it so it'd be there when he came back and if he wanted a clean cup in the morning, he'd havta wash it hisself. Now its like if she leaves it there he will havta come back and clean it -- that coffee cup will just pull him back from the grave. He'll come back out of obligation to clean up after hisself.

She has every picture from every photo album over the years in frames. It is like a ghost town. No one says anything bout it, cuz really, what can be said?

This sounds like a lie but its true. I think of it as my Granma LucyMae syndrome. If 100 people tell me I am okay I might not believe them but if my Granma says I am an evil monster cause my Granpa came to see me and then died when he was drivin home, half his brains scattered all over the highway and some drunk truck driver sitting on the side of the road so far gone that he dint even realize what he'd done, I am willing to believe it but not completely so I fight it and try to convince her I'm okay.

One of these days I am moving thousands of miles away from her and even if i don't have one friend in my new state, once I am away from my pressure of Granny and her hopes of me taking care

of her cause i owe her for making my Granddaddy love me being the reason he went and got hisself killed, I will get my brain back.

Granddaddy dint die right a way. They patched him up as good as they could and he hung on for a week or so. I went to see him where he was and an they couldn't pull me from his beds side with a 4x4. He come in an out of his lirium from time to time, an he was ware nuff he could tell i was mighty upset. One time he come to, he reached over and patted me on the arm and told me not to turn myself all inside out. There weren't nothing to worry bout.

"How can you say that, Granddaddy? Doctor says your mighty sick. Might even die."

"Honey, i bin through an awful lot in my life and in that time i done learned only 1 of 2 things can happen. I'm either gonna get better or get worse. If I get better," he says tween gasps of air, "there wont be nothing to worry bout at all, and if i get worse, there's only two things to worry bout. I'll either get better or die."

He seemed to doze off for a couple seconds but then woke up with a tiny start like he membered he had something to tell me. "An ifn I get better, course there wont be nothing to worry bout, and if i die there'll only be two things to fret over. Either i head up going to heaven or the other place. Ifn I go to heaven, LORD KNOWS, i aint got nothing to worry bout, and if its hell ... well, i'll be so busy catching up with old friends, i wont got no time to worry bout nothing!"

He thought that was so funny and laughed and laughed probably more n what was good for him cuz then he launched into a coughing fit something terrible, coughin up blood even, and that's when the nurses come in and this time they made sure i left his beds side.

I remind myself that i never asked him to come up. He was 75. He made a choice. If i even for a second take responsibility for her hate on top of the unhappiness the people, in the town feel at people of color in general (and are family in particular), I would be overwhelmed. She was also mad because I dint cry at the funeral.

But some tears are cried inside.

~ ~ ~

## Why I went for Abe

I spose at this point, I oughta tell you something 'bout Abe. I think i tole you afore that he was a english teacher over at the high school (well, if i dint i shoulda) but he was more 'en that. First off, he weren't real pretty to look at. He had a chest thick as a barrow and moved real quick like in little bursts once he got going. His hands was soft like someone that never worked outside a day in his life, tho his arms was puffed up from working out, strong but in a different kinda way than the men round McCauleysville that worked with their hands all day long. He had a lop-sided head that reminded me of a

lightbulb that kinda swelled and bulged at odd spots and a little white scar across his forehead that he said he got in a accident when he was a kid. He said he got a lot of money for it – and it was before he could even remember about it – but he dint like to talk about it.

I sorta got the idea that he lost something there.

It was Thanksgiving dinner that I finally brought Abe around to see the family. I hadn't really wanted to, but my family'd been after me for some time, and Abe, he'd made some comments like I was either shamed of him or shamed of my family (and maybe the truth was, maybe a little of both), but whichever it was, it was time to get over it, and just bring everything out in the open.

"As long as we're honest and open about everything," he said, "nothing bad will happen."

Poor baby, how can anybody go to college so many years and still be so stupid, I jes don't know. But anyways, I told my folks I was bringing a friend over for Thanksgiving dinner, and not to be surprised, because he was a little older than I was, but he was a nice man, and I liked him an awful lot.

So, I thought things was all set up for Abe and me to arrive, but first off, when we got there, Papa he couldn't stop staring. He was standing there on the porch with his mouth open like he was fixing to catch flies. I had to tell him three times to shake hands with Abe, but I tried not to make a big deal out of it, just kind of wheedled it into the

conversation like. "This here's Abe. I know him from school. Let me introduce Abe to you Daddy. He's a friend of mine from school. I don't think I proply introduced Abe to you, Daddy. I guess we should shake hands and go inside."

I can't account for what made them all so antsy about Abe, excepting he was near as old as my folks. And he was black, like I said. So, I reckon them two things.

My Granmas was sitting on the couch eating caramel popcorn. That's regular popcorn what with caramel poured all over it, till it gets all gooey and sweet like. And Granma BetttyLou, I know she dint need any more on account of her diabetes, but she always said, holidays and the Fourth of July were days she got to go off her diet, like the diabetes would go on holiday those days, so she was digging in up to her wrists and shoving great gobs of popcorn into her face, not a pretty sight, I've got to admit, bless her heart, and now and then offering Abe a handful, which he politely declined, saying he was waiting for Mama's wonderful turkey dinner that he could just smell coming from the kitchen.

Uncle Willie was the family historian. Our people go way back, ya see. The stories they tell, the first MacCauley came over after a war against the English and the English drove all the Scots outta Scotland, which I guess ain't totally true seeing as there's still some over there, but outta our part anyway. For a while in parts of Carolina, there was parts that still spoke the old language but that's



‘mostly dried out by now, but they’s still people like my uncle Willie that still keep to the old ways, and every holiday he’d pull out his bagpipes and let ‘em rip. I always thought the sound of them things sounded like love-struck cats serenading a herd of cows, and the cows mooing back, but I guess I kinda got used to it after a while, cuz no Thanksgiving would be complete without Uncle Willie and his bagpipes.

And then he’d pull out his whiskey. It weren’t Scotch, but what our people made here in his country from the recipes brought over on the ships that brought ‘em here – Uncle Willie, he was a regular scholar of old timey stuff. Then after the bagpipes, and the whiskey lecture, Willie’d set to serious drinking. That’s part of the tradition, too, I reckon.

This time was a little difrent as he got Abe to drinking, which I knowed wasn’t a good idea, but how was I gonna say something to full growed men, and me just being a girl, and an Abe being teacher with a doctrine degree, and all?

So Abe was going on about all the poverty in the world and said something about in some countries they ain’t got but one pair of underwear for every two people. Well, I knowed what he was talking about that we don’t realize how good we’ve got it, how rich we really are here, and now on this day of Thanks Giving specially, we oughta be mindful of our blessings and might should turn our thoughts, if’n only for a minute or so, to those that

ain't as fortunate as us, but I could of told him not to use that particular bit of logic with my Uncle Willie and Daddy – they'd jumped all over it.

"Willie," my daddy sez, confidential like, "you suppose I might could use your underwear tomorrow? I've got to give a sermon in church, and I want to make a good impression."

"Well, I don't know. I was planning on goin out Saturday night, and they might not be in the cleanest condition in the morning. Don't know what your flock would think."

Mama, she wasn't doing much cookin' right then, because she'd been into her vodka since around noon. See, it was Mama's habit to have what she called a cock tail round bout 3 o'clock. Then she had a pear ateeef, made of the same stuff, and then a before-dinner cock tail, so by around the time we was ready to eat, she was pretty wobbly.

This was her usual schedule, but on holidays, she sped up the clock a bit. She'd start drinking around noon, when the turkey got put in the oven, and wouldn't stop till the turkey – or her – was put to bed. So she was already pretty far gone by the time Abe arrived, and she took to eying him like a mama sheep staring down a stray dog.

My daddy was more direct. He come round the table like that same stray dog -- I can use the same metaphor (a metaphor is what my English teacher calls it when one thing stands in for another ... you see, that's the meta "for" part) -- his legs still, and a peculiar, sharp look in his eye. And he starts

chatting with Abe, real polite like. "How'd you happen to meet my daughter?" and as soon as Abe would explain, hardly waiting for him to get the words out, Daddy would point out something like, "There's quite an age difference between you, ain't there?"

My granpa, he's sitting at the table and says something to me, "Angel-Louise, honey, pass me some of them nigger toes, would you?"

"Granpa, they're not nigger toes. Please." I was trying to shush Granpa and listen outta the corner of my ears at the same time.

"You've got to be careful about such things," my Daddy was saying, "when a fellow such as yourself ..." (Daddy wouldn't come right out and say Abe was near old nuff to be my Daddy hisself), "takes an interest in a girl young as my Angel-Louise." (You'll note that Daddy dint say nothing about my being a young white girl, even though his meaning was as clear as if he'd got up on top of the porch roof and shouted it to the neighbors). "Most people can't help but think he ain't got but one thing on his mind."

"What do you think, Mr. ...?" I heard Abe ask, as politiest as he could,

"I'm not talking about me, mind you. I've got an open mind about such things," my Daddy said, without naming what some such things might be, but it might as well have been with a wink and a nudge in the ribs, like Abe and me were doing all sorts of things, which we hadn't been up to that

time, and might not have if my folks hadn't put such ideas in our heads.

But I couldn't listen no more because Granpa thought I had been telling him he couldn't have any of those chocolate covered cherries and took to reminding me that since it was a holiday, the rules dint apply ... like we were Jewish or something and had these special dietary laws that governed us all the rest of the year except for Thanksgiving, Christmas and the fourth of July, and that he could have as many as he wanted. After all, it was his seed that had made this whole goddamn family so he was due some respect. The mention of his seed made Granma Lucymae blush, and made my Mama hiss, "Papa!" but he kept on. "So I'll eat as many of them goddamn niggertoes I want."

At which point, I was so near fed up with him, that I just shoved the whole "goddamned" bowl at him (if you'll excuse my Dutch, but I was only quoting), "Have your goddamn niggertoes. I hope you they comatize you!" and turned back to Daddy and Abe to hear Daddy nattering something to Abe about how a grown man finds a newbile girl very enticing, but after all, they's laws about such things," not specifying what those laws might be about.

It was about this time that I noticed Abe's jaw getting all tense and the neck muscles in his neck starting to tense up. But he asks, with only the slightest edge in his voice, "You like jokes, Mr. McCauley?"

"I supposed I like 'em as well as the next fella," my Daddy told him, with a sly grin that I ain't never seed before, "as long as they ain't too dirty, or if they are, they ain't told in mixed company."

"I think you'll like this one. It'll really tickle you," and Abe leaned real close to Daddy and lowering his voice so I could just barely hear him said, "What does a redneck girl say when she loses her virginity?"

Papa changed colors then. It was his turn to get mad, and you could tell he was fixing to. And even though Abe had spoke real soft like, he'd said the last word loud enough so everybody else could hear.

"Git up, paa, you're crushin' my smokes."

The whole room went quiet, you'd of sworn everybody had been struck by lightening and froze up in time just like that.

My daddy looked like Mr. Bremmer's cow after Mr. Bremmer took his sledge hammer and whomped it between the eyes. Not real steady on his feet but not quite ready to fall down, neither, till he gave himself a shake and screamed something like, "You CHILD-MOLESTIN-PERVERTED-NIGGER-SON-OF-A-BITCH!" And when he ran out of bad things he could scream, he goes for Abe.

Abe stands up and catches Daddy coming at him, and the two are fighting in the middle of the room, struggling over the turkey dressing, Mama's standing at the door to the kitchen with a bottle of

vodka and a glass of grapefruit juice in her hands, whining “What’s going on? What’s going on?”

Granpa’s insisting that he dint hear: “What he say? Longevity? What’s a redneck girl say when she loses her longevity?”

Granmas Lucymae and Betty on sitting on the couch stuffing caramel popcorn in their mouths like they was watching a movie at the Main Street cinema.

And it seems like I’m the only one that has any sense. I’m jumping up and down between these two fools screaming at them to stop.

“Abe, leave it alone! We’re going! Abe! We’re leaving.” And I drag Abe out the door, though I have to admit he must have let me, because there was no way I could of dragged him if he hadn’t.

When we were outside, I could just feel how angry poor Abe was. Every muscle was tensed and his voice was shaking. “You hear what he said to me. You hear what he was saying about you?”

I was scared that he was going to go back inside and do something, or that if we stuck around my daddy was going to do something, and I dint want to be visiting neither of them up at the state pen, so I shouted, “ABE, GET IN THE CAR!” and much to my surprise, that’s what he did.

That’s when my daddy come down the steps and picked up a handful of gravel from the driveway and begins throwing them at us so hard it broke Abe’s windshield, but at least we hadn’t been shot at, but I was mighty feared that was gonna come next.

My Daddy was throwing rocks at his car and breaking his windows, Granma Lucy Mae and Granma Betty Lou were sitting on the sofa on the staring out my folks big ol' picture window at the show, eating their caramel corn, granpa was stuffing his face with niggertoes (alright I said it, I'm bad, I'll just go to the place where bad people go), and mama was screaming at the door that somebody spilled her liquor, and Uncle Willie, with this gleeful look on his face, was blowing away at his bagpipes like he piping the boys up the hill for one last shot at those English sons-of-bitches, and all the time I'm screaming at poor Abe, "Get outta here. For the love of Jesus H. Christ, get out of here!" (Though I knowed full well that Jesus dint have nothing to do with it; I was just afraid Abe was going to get hisself killed.)

We'd drove about a five miles in three minutes when I told Abe to stop. "Just pull over," I don't him, on account that I was 'fraid we'd get in a wreck from the way he was driving.

"Abe, that was crazy." I wanted him to think about what'd happened. I wanted us to talk about it. Get it out.

"I know. I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not usually like that."

"I know he said some ugly things to you," I told him.

"Is our age difference a concern to you?"

"Age is just a number."

"That I'm black?"

"Black is just a color. Just like white."

“Anyway, none of what he said about me bothered me. It was what he said about you that I got angry at.”

I swear, my heart leaped like a frog on a hot plate up when I heard him say that. I ain’t never before had anybody take my side in anything.

You’re going to think I am a totally bad girl, but I wanted him then, wanted him worse than I’d ever wanted anything else before in my whole life, wanted him in ways I dint even know, but wanted him totally.

~ ~ ~

## Somethin bout Abe

Abe weren’t jes’ a teacher. He had asprinations to makin’ a difference. A real difference. Ya see, he believed we weren’t treating animals right. He said all god’s creatures had rights not to feel pain, but we de-sensitized ourselves to the pain we inflicted on animals by killing em, and eating ‘em, and making ‘em live on factory farms in little cages that dint give ‘em no room to roam, like the song says, on the range. We was able to do this – treat the animals so mean, I mean -- by dehumanitizing them ... which dint rightly make a lot of sense to me, since wouldn’t they have to be human first before you dehumanitized them? But



then I figured, I was only a hick kid from Hicksville, South Carolina. What the hell did I know? (Sorry, I jes' can't help myself. I've got a dirty mouth).

One thing got him steamed unner his caterpillar hat -- greedy agra-business, corporate farmers. Whenever he said that, I always pictured a fat businessman driving a tracker. I pointed out to him ain't nobody'd wear a suit to drive a tractor in -- it'd get too hot -- but then he 'splained it's not the facts, it's the idea. He's trying to communicate the truth of the idea, he'd 'splain, and sometimes ya gotta lie to tell the truth.

All the time we was hanging out together, we couldn't rightly go out to dinner. He'd get apoplexy thinking about eating meat ... so we'd stay at his place and eat tofu burgers ... which weren't as disgusting as you'd think if you smothered ;'em with barbecue sauce. We couldn't have sugar cuz of the exploitation of the sugar cane workers, and honey was out on account of the theft of the honey from them poor bees who was storing up their honey for their own families only to come back and find their life savings stolen from 'em by the same people who could've "sensitively harvested" the the honey instead honey (that was a big word with him -- sensitive, I mean), being responsible bee care-takers, 'stead of bee slave holders.

The one thing that made him madder than a cat you done tossed in a pool was people who let their animals get pregnant ... though I couldn't quite figure out what the pet owner.

(I'm sorry, pet companion -- no, that's not right. Its "animal companion," like in companion of the animal, but that don't sound right. I'm not talking 'bout the animal, but the human, so wouldn't it be the human companion to the animal? I never could get that right.)

Anyway, what this person that had hisself a pet was supposed to do to discourage his ol' tomcat from wanting to get together with girl cats, especially seein' how Abe dint 'prove of the old fashioned fixin'. Said that was a violation of the animals' rights to sexual self-expression. So, whatdaya supposed to do? I mean, you gonna lecture your cat on birth control? Give your tomcat condoms before he goes out for a night on the town. "Be careful, now, Fluffy. Safe sex!"

Made me laugh to think that safe sex for a cat was not hunkering down in the middle of the road and getting' runned over before you finished your business. But I would think of something like that, when Abe had his mind on all sorts of high-minded stuff. I guess that's what I loved 'bout him. He was so passionate 'bout his ethics. Nothing justifies putting one life ahead of another, he said. Even human life weren't more special than that of the slimiest grub bug. He caught a firefly once and held it up to me. "This is as precious to god," he says, "as you or me or the tiniest baby or the prettiest little girl. It's all the same. We're all god's creatures -- figuratively speaking, of course." (He always used to do that, 'pologize, I mean, for mentioning God. One

time he cut his hand breakin' into a pound to free all the dogs that was set to be executed, and he let out a huge "God damn!" And then he 'pologized, not for swearing, like any normal, well-brought up fella woulda, but for "referring to a worn out metaphor of karmic justice" – that's his own words. But I'm on the grass, as they say.)

He wrote what he called progressive children's books ... spreading a new age gospel of compassion for animal rights, but he dint even call 'em animals. That's a slur like calling someone the n-word. Sorry, I if I offended you, but it's the only way I could think to splain how he thought. He called 'em "non-sentient beings," and that's a mouthful I know – it don't 'xactly roll off the tongue, neither. You can't rightly shout out, "That non-sentient being is fixin' to do its business on the carpet! Please put our non-human companion outside." Before you get all those words chewed and spit out, the stupid dog woulda already made its mess. But in a way, he had a point. I mean think of all the negative associations we have with the word "animal." Whenever somebody does something that we don't like, we call them acting like an animal. They even made a movie 'bout a bunch of crazy college boys, and they called it Animal House. All of which gives animals a bad name. On the other hand, my ol' dog use to lick his butt, an' no college boy's ever done that, I reckon, so I guess they're all 'bout even.

Abe'd show me the books he was working on. We'd go out and sit on his front porch after ... well,

afterwards, and we was naked as bluejays, rocking back an' forth on his porch swing, quite a sight for the neighbors to see – if he'd had any neighbors, that is; his place was out in the country, kinda. The bugs would be buzzin' round – the moths circling the porch light, the beetles smackin' themselves into the screen door, the fireflies doing their fairy dance, like my granma use to call it, under the drooping willow tree out in the yard, and the cicadas a strumming their bows like they was getting' set to play at Carnage Hall.

He brought tears to my eyes telling me the sad story of Chicken Little ... the little chicken in an dustrial chicken processing plant who tried to warn all the other chickens about the “day of doom.” So, poor little Chicken Little ran around warning all the others – Henny Penny, Clucky Lucky, Roaster Rooster -- but nobody listened to him. They all said, kind Farmer Jones wouldn't do nothing like that. He comes an' feeds us, an' Mrs. Jones takes care of our little ones in little chickadee day care, so we can sit and cluck around all day. Till finally, Chicken Little, he showed the other chicken-people (that's what Abe called 'em) a movie 'bout the Hollow Cast -- that's where the Nazis killed all the Jews -- and Chicken Little warned that if they dint do nothing, pretty soon they'd end up in the ovens just like them poor Jews, an' all the other chicken-people got to thinkin' that if people could do that to their own kind, they sure as hell ('scuse me) could do it to them.

An' then a chicken sympathizer leaked a used Kentucky Fried Chicken box full of chicken bones from the big White House that Farmer Jones and Mrs. Farmer Jones lived in, an' all the chickens gathered round an' looked at it, an' even the supporters of the White House 'ministration had to 'mit that was the smokin' barbeque pit they was lookin' for. (Abe dint like to say 'smokin' gun' on account it might give kids a wrong idea, 'bout guns and all, I mean, an' not about smokin' ... though come to think of it, that too.)

So all the chicken-people raised a chicken rebellion and drove the evil Farmer Jones off the farm by throwing chicken poop on them -- an' I gotta tell you, that part was real funny. Then they raised a class action law suit and won that farm and made it into a chicken collective, though I kinda lost interest in that part of the story, it dragged on sorta.

There was pictures an' everything. It was real affecting to me, but when I told Abe, it's a good story, but you can't fight old McDonald's farm -- people wanted their Big Macs, or their Chicken McNuggets, or whatever it is -- you shoulda seen him.

He stood up, an' he was all mad, an' his face was all twisted an' he was talking so loud that I thought he'd wake the neighbors even though they was a half-mile down the road, an' it woulda been real impressive, him standin' there makin' his speech 'bout moral rights and not being prejudiced 'gainst people just 'cuz they got feathers or four legs, an' how two hundred years ago, people wanted their

slaves in this part of the country. But they've learned since then. People have to learn that others have rights ... just like people of different skin color have rights, so do people of a different feather."

'Cept you gotta remember, he was naked as a skinned cat, so he all the time he was shoutin' an' gettin' red in the face an' wavin' his arms, with his little tummy stickin' out and his dingle-dangle flappin' in the air like one of them train-crossing warning signs, he looked so ridiculous, bless his heart, I had to laugh. Weren't nothin' else I could do but laugh at him, an' squeeze him, an' love him.

And that I did.

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*If I done good, how come I feel so rotten?*

I was working on a paper for school and I couldn't find the right way to start it or end it, partly I guess because I kept on thinking of Abe. Wherever turned, there was something that reminded me of him. Like I had this dream: I was in a sunny place with palm trees, so I guess it could've been down at Myrtle Beach cause there's plenty of palmettos down there – they're like palm trees, only smaller, sort of like miniatures ... anyway, there was a lot of people around and I was talking to them and somebody brought me a phone and said it was Abe,

did I want to talk to him? I said, yes, and took the phone. I couldn't hear the voice on the other end, it was so little, and I woke up from that dream, it was the middle of the night, and I just lay there thinking about Abe and what I'd done to him. You see, after he and I had been together, I got to feeling how bad I was, sneakin' 'round behind my Mama's and Daddy's backs to be with a man, I mean, and a grown man on top of all of all that ... in spite of what I'd said before.

I got to thinkin what the Good Book said about deesire being the Devil's playground. And I was so drunk with Deesire, I couldn't hardly stand it. Couldn't hardly count the number of ways I was bad, so I done something that that I ain't too proud of and maybe the thing that makes me the regretfulest. Afterwards I come to realize it wasn't nothing to be ashamed or nothing, but at the time, I just dint know what to do about it ... not quite sure what it all meant.

It all started with a conversation I had with Abe. I was telling him I was having problems with our being together, and doing what we were doing. "You're a man, a full-grown man," I told him. "Here I am, a girl not even out of high school and you a grown man with a wife ... that's divorcing you, sure – but still ... If I dint feel bad before, I surely do now. I don't know if I can do this."

And then he did the strangest thing. He said he dint care what we did, meaning whether we did it or not. "That's not important," he said. "What's important is you. And my being with you." And

before I left, he took me in his arms and said, "I don't talk like this to anybody. I need you. Don't leave me." Only he dint mean, don't leave him right then and there, but don't leave-leave him, like, in a general way. Forever.

And I promised him I never would.

And it was after I went home that I realized what I would have to do. I'd have to hurt him bad to make him leave me alone ... because withouten that, I was a goner, so you see, it was really self-defense, and for his good too that I set out to do what I did (which like I said, I ain't proud of, but I'm telling you so you'll know the truth about me and how truly bad I can be, to do such a thing to the person who loved me most -- outside my own family, of course -- after all, blood's thicker 'n mud -- because I knew if I dint do something to make him go away, I'd do something really bad.

I had this assignment in school that I had to see a cultural event -- that meant like something you couldn't get by just watching TV, not even the Discovery Channel or the Arts and Entertainment channel. You actually had to go someplace and like see it ... it could be a concert or a play or even a museum. So one day when I was telling Abe about this. We'd met at the Waffle House like we usually did, and I was scarfing a plate of waffles, and he was sipping a cup of coffee (now, their waffles are mighty good, all the way from Belgium, some of them, but I'll advise you to stay away from the coffee. It's as bitter as ditch water off the innerstate



and about as good tasting, though for some reason Abe seemed to like it because he was coming in an awful lot just to have a cup of coffee).

“Does Shakespeare count?” he asked me. “Is that culture enough?” He always had a funny way of saying things. Always put a humorous twist on ‘em.

“I suppose so,” not knowing what he was getting at.

“They’re doing Romeo and Juliet, over at the college. It’s kind of a cliché, but you want to go? I can get us some tickets.”

I couldn’t say no, since he put it like that, so I said, yes, all the time thinking I shouldn’t.

The next time he came in, he showed me the tickets that he’d bought. They were expensive, too expensive, I thought. “I can’t return these now,” he said. “We’re on.”

I don’t know if it was that I was feeling pressured into going with him, or I was hearing my Mama’s and Daddy’s voices, saying I oughtn’t.

The next time I met him I asked him if we were still on, if we were still going, hoping, I guess that he’d cancel, but no luck. He said we were.

By now I was getting desperate. I asked him again the next time and when he said yes, and the day was coming near, I told him I’d call him just to confirm.

That night I woke up in a cold sweat from a nightmare I’d been having. It was one of them dreams where you want to run away as fast as you

can from something terrible but you couldn't move and all I remember seeing is red and black.

I called him – it musta been 3 a.m. in the morning. 'Don't hate me,' I said into the answering machine, my heart pounding so loud I was afraid he'd hear it on the recording and my tongue swollen so large I nearly choked on it. "I'm working on a paper for school, and I can't get it done. I'm gonna have to work all day tomorrow." Then my tongue got stuck, and I couldn't think of what else to say, so I just blurted out, "Please don't hate me," and I hung up as fast as I could.

I tried to tell myself that it wasn't like I was standing him up cuz it wasn't even like it was a date, we had. Not a date-date. After all, it was in the middle of the day, a matinee, like they have in at the movies (only it wasn't no bargain matinee movie they have at the mall). But as much as I should have felt good about doing the right thing because no good could of come of our being together, I felt a hollow, sick feeling in my stomach, and my only comfort was the thought that I'd done both of us a favor and that he'd be so mad at me for breaking off our going to the play together and making him spend all that money that he'd never have nothing to do with me from then on out.

But it's funny about doing what you think you should. Sometimes, you don't feel so good afterwards like you'd think you oughta.

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## Bare assed, bare foot and the wings of fate

Then, late one night after I hadn't seen him for more n a week – I'd walk the long way round the school so as not to go by his classroom and minded my q's and p's so as I wasn't sent to Study Hall -- when I already'd gone to bed, and the crickets were chirping away in the soybean field out my back window, (though like we learned in Biology class, they don't really chirp, not like birds does, but instead they rub their legs together and make a sound sort of like they're strumming little bug cellos ), anyway, Abe all a sudden come over and parked back of the house so his headlights shined in my window, though how he'd known it was mine, I don't rightly know -- he might've been shining into Granma Bettylou's window, and then wouldn't that have been a giggle!

But anyways, he dint, and the light on the wall ventually woke me up, and I went to the window to see if the Amtrack train dint come off the tracks again and was headed right for my little room, but instead of staring down the Ashville-Spartanburg Redeye Express, I found myself blinking into the bug-eyed headlights of Abe's VW bus.

He flashed them on me, and I knew. Don't ask me what I knew or how I knew. It was just something down in my gut, so I climbed out the

window and padded across the yard in my undies and the tee-shirt my mama and Peter brought back from their trip to Florida, one of them stupid things that says, "My Mama went to Orlando, and all I got was this stupid tee-shirt," that was supposed to be funny but was really more hurtful than I can say cuz every time I wore it, it 'minded me of my mama and daddy goin' off in different directions and me being thrown out and living with my two crazy Granmas, bless their hearts, who I loved dearly, but still weren't my mama and daddy, but I wore the damn thing anyway ('scuse my language), kinda wrappin' myself in the last rag end of my raggedy-ass family.

I come up on Abe's VW bus, barefoot and bare assed, and I says, "Abe, what're you doing here?" which wasn't the smartest thing I coulda said, but it certainly was 'propriate.

"On a rescue mission," was all Abe said.

I went all red. I was sure glad it was dark so he couldn't see. I tried to make my voice level and steady, but I know it rose up in kind of a soft cry. "What do I need to be rescued for?"

"Not you." He made a noise like I'd said something so addle-brained he couldn't hardly hold back a laugh, but he tried to, so it ended up coming up through his nose like some ol' bull snortin. "Though that's a thought," he said, kinda thoughtful, teasin' like.

I could feel the squishy cold dew creeping through my toes and the breeze whistling up my buttcrack. My panties were riding up to give me a

wedgie but I dint want to reach back and hitch them down, not with him looking at me like that.

I could feel him looking through the darkness like one of them laser pointers Billy Macardy used to shine on old Mrs. Crutchins butt in history class that made all the kids laugh and got us detention for a long afternoon. I felt like if somebody dint say something, I was going to get detented, myself. I wasn't feelin' bad, just kind of ... tickly, if you know what I mean. Like if I dint do nothin', I'd bust out in giggles and pee right then and there all over my feet. Finally – after he got tired of reading my mind, it seemed like (though for him, it was more like reading a comic book, than one of them thousand-page Russian novels they were gonna make us read in tenth grade next year.

(Though I guess I don't have to worry 'bout that no more, though I might check one out from the library once I get settled).

But anyways, finally he says something. "Not you," he says. "The others. Get in."

My heart was beatin' so fast and I was breathin' so hard like I'd just run a mile, full out. I was glad to have something to do to keep me busy till I stopped shakin', so I scooted round the van and popped into the seat next to him.

"You'd better pull your shirt down," was all he says, starting the engine.

We drove the 221 that runs down to Spartanburg, and then we looped onto the old 9 that runs west and east through the state. Abe said

somethin' 'bout wanting to stay off the main highway. We was heading downhill, so I gathered we was aiming for the flatlands. Leastways, that's what the signs said that come up like flashes in my dream, looming up large in a splash of white light and great splotches of black and now and then pinpoints of the red tail lights of cars up ahead of us, and then blipping out, sudden like, and everything was all black again.

We rolled the windows down and the hot night air rushed in on us, drying the sweat off our bodies. We dint say much but just listened to the stereo -- some old rock guy singing love songs.

(It was kinda funny I thought. I ain't never hung around them folks, but from what I heard of 'em, they never hung around the same woman long enough to learn her name, much less love her, but here he was screeching his teeth out that 'everybody oughta believe in love,' or some such silly thing.)

Anyways, I dint know if I was being abducted or if we was eloping or just going down for a Baskin Robbins, not that it made much difference either way. I sat there feeling the hot air blowing my hair, my feet picking through the trash on the floor -- paper, tissue, and an occasional aluminum can. (Abe sure coulda used been introduced to the concept of a trash bag.)

Onct in a while I look over at him -- at first, real quick like, so as to catch him unawares like, but he was driving so intent, squinting into the dark winding mountain road like he could hurry us on

our way if only he looked hard enough, that I took to staring at him, and examining him real close, this guy that was going to love me, or rape me, or kill me, or buy me an ice cream cone -- one or t'other, or maybe all three. He was wearing a tee-shirt that said 'Don't experiment on man's best friend' (I couldn't read it right then but did later when I was lying on it in the woods) and jeans that rode tight on his thighs. He dint have no jewelry or nothin' -- except a thin metal chain around his neck that I saw peeking out from under his shirt collar -- not one of them cheap 14-carrot gold things but just a plain steel chain that held a St. Francis medal -- he's the patron saint of animals, ya know. I found this out later, too; and a scar that wrapped his wrist and ran up the back of his hand like a bracelet. He had long brown hair and soft whiskers from not shaving for a couple days. I could tell from the muscles cording his forearms that was gripping the wheel real hard. In a funny kind of way, that reassured me. I couldn't 'magine nobody who was strong killin' me. That just left the other three possibilities.

We pulled off the freeway and drove up a long narrow country road that led up to like an old plantation house set back from the highway down a long row of trees that bent over the highway like they was inspecting us. We pulled slow by an old iron gate and then drove a bit further down the road, finally parking in a dark spot under some trees, where we couldn't see the highway or be seen. Well, this is it, I figured. This is where I meet my fate.

And it was funny. Like you hear of people at the moment of death. I wasn't scared. More like relaxed and content. What comes, comes, I reckoned. I ain't got no control. And that thought gave me peace. Like the peace of the Amazing Grace washed over me. And I sat there with my eyes squeezed shut and waited for the Angel of the Lord to come and whisk me away.

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what the bunnies done

But instead of the fluttering of the wings of the god's messenger, I hear Abe snap, impatient like, "You aren't falling asleep on me, are you?" I feel a big weight in my lap and open my eyes to stare down on a pair of giant bolt cutters that he'd slapped down there. "Come on," he says. "We gotta move!" At that he swings outta the van and kinda crouching he moves forward, I 'magine, like what he figures he's seen the commandos in the movies do, but really it was more like scuttlin' like an armadillo with an itchy butt. (I actually saw one of them onct when I went out down to Texas to visit my Aunt Sassy that'd moved out there, and that was the funniest sight – the armadillo, not Aunt Sassy – and not at all suiting for a commando hero, but it was kinda cute to see Abe dragging his butt down the side of the road).



But I weren't gonna scuttle. You could bet your behind on that. There I was, my butt flapping in the wind under my nightie tee-shirt (if there had a been a wind, it woulda, I mean), barefoot as a backcountry youngin, and luggin fifteen pounds of solid steel. I weren't gonna sacrifice any more of my dignity by pretending I was no secret agent.

Anyway, Abe, he crawls up to this old gate that's got a chain round it, as thick 's my wrist, which ain't big 's far as wrists go, but for a chain, that's pretty damn chunky. (Sorry for cussin'. I guess I'm incorrugated.) He looks round for his bolt cutter, which I'm holding, standing right beside him. You can't scuttle all that fast if'n you're playing battlefield, so it was pretty easy to keep up with him.

"Get down!" he hisses between his teeth.

"What for?" I tell him. "Ain't nobody 'round here gonna see us."

"Get down!"

There's only so much foolishness a girl will put up with, even from a guy that's just gone and abducted her from her Granmas' house. "You want your bolt cutters or not?" I tol" him.

"Give 'em to me," he says, like he was gonna ignore how I was spoiling his play-pretend.

So he sets to work snapping the lock that held that chain. It was pretty big itself, but nowheres near as big as the chain. He tried muscling it with his wrists and then put s his whole arms into it. When that dint work, he got it so he was bringing the whole strength of his shoulders – I could see the

muscles bulge under his shirt – and then I said, lemme help. He was gonna laugh, but I saw he was too polite to laugh in my face, and I say, “I’ll hold it against the fence here, and you throw your whole body weight into it.” You see, I figured, that way, he could put his legs and back into the haft

Well, I brace myself in the fence and cradle the one handle of the bolt cutters in my tummy.

“You okay?” he asked. He was cute, being so concerned about me as we was breaking into the compound.

“Yeah,” I told him. “Come on.”

So, he braces like he’s pushing a truck up a steep hill, and I couldn’t tell whether the metal was giving or if the handle was just pushing deeper into my gut, but sudden like, it snaps, and he lunges forward into me and kinda leans there against me for a second, and I can feel him against me through my tee-shirt. I ain’t never felt nothing like it. That’s funny, ain’t it, the things you remember. All I been through, and that’s what sticks in my mind -- Abe near pressing the wind outta me that first tme. It was all I could do to breathe out the words. “I think we done it,” I says.

We slipped through the gate and scooted up the driveway till we could cut across the grass toward the big old plantation house that was set back from the road. I was glad that we was running, glad that we had something to do cause my head was swimming. It was like I was drunk, or something – though I ain’t never been drunk before,

just from what I heard – but if it's anything like being on the twirlygig thingy they got over at Six Flags, that's what I felt like. I felt like I was drifting over that grass, felt like I was flying like Peter Pan in that old movie, or ET and the kids flying over the moon. Felt like the top of my head was lifting off.

We come to this side window – Abe, he counts the windows from the corner -- you know, like 1, 2, 3, 4 -- and slides this one up pretty as you please. We crawled through that window and padded across a office and then opened a door on what looked to be like a little zoo. Inside was all cages with little critters in 'em. Cats and dogs and puppies and kittens. Little, tiny white mice, and big ol' black monkees and chimpanzees. There was rabbits and guinea pigs (though they dint look at all like pigs, I'm here to tell you), even an armadillo and a bobcat.

For anybody who thinks setting a bunch of wild and semi-wild animals free is an easy thing to do, I got news for 'em. It ain't no walk by the riverside. The rabbits dint want to lave their little rabbit pellets. The armadillo rolled up into a ball. The bobcat scatted like a cat outta hell and immediately holed up in a metal file cabinet, and Abe nearly lost his hand and half his face when he tried to get it out. We tried to shush all the animals out the door, but the dogs set to barking at us like we was intruding on their territory, instead of setting them free. We finally had to hook Abe's belt around their necks and tug them out. One was a

great, big, huge black fellow that dug in his feet on the linoleum floor, and we could hear his claws scratching all the way down the corridor, and his howling as he protested was something terrible, like we was dragging him to a flea bath, not setting him free.

We lugged the rabbit cages out and dumped the dumb bunnies out, and they set to lopping lazily on the lawn.

Abe got a broom and flushed the bobcat out. As it was scootin', we set to hollering and waving our arms and kinda steered to toward the door, and once it got a whiff of outside he scatted.

It wasn't all clean, like I'm telling you, though. That ol' bobcat, he figured he'd pick hisself up a meal on the way, I reckon, and swooped up one of them bunnies, just as casual as you or me would take a stop at old Macdonald's, and he run off into the trees with the little bunny b between his teeth squealing something awful I wanted to set out after the bobcat and teach him some manners – after all, we was there to give these poor critters a new life, not set them on each other – but Abe, he 'splained how what we was seeing was nature taking its of course. It might be wrong for us to kill the poor little critters cuz we knew better, but for that little ol' bobcat, being a rabbit snatchin' polecat was the only way it knew. "It's the way god made him," Abe said, and then like he was apologizing for saying the n-word, he added real quick, "if you believe in god, that is."

So it was like Jesus said on the cross. Forgive 'em, Lord. They don't know no better no how.

About this time, the state trooper come rolling up to the front gate and parked there. He dint come directly in. I guess he was waiting to see if anybody was still about. I guess he figured he dint know if we had guns or rifles or something, and he weren't no fool. He dint want no trouble where he dint have to have none. So he just sat there in his trooper car shining the light through the iron gate bars at the plantation house, giving us enough warning that he was there and it was time to clear out. Which we did. We climbed out the back window the same way we come in and hightailed it across the yard to the back gate where we come in.

We was flying. I ain't never felt nothing like it. not before, and not after.

We runned as fast as we could, hardly stopping for the tiny hole in the gate but flew through like a couple blackbirds outta the night the ground was cutting up my feet – rocks and sticks – and the brush was whipping my skin under my tee-shirt till I bled, but I dint care. I was flying. Couldn't have been flying no higher. Flying and giggling something crazy. we kinda got turned around on our way back and found ourselves doubling back, and in the confusion come on some hunters' deer blind. Abe went crazy on it. tugging and pulling and tearing it down. I jumped on it myself, hardly knowing what I was doing. Just going kinda crazy on it. all's I knew was some mean ol' hunter used it to trick some poor

unsuspecting deer, and it seemed so mean and low-down and full of unfair trickery that I jumped on it too. I was pushing and Abe was tugging. And then I was pulling and Abe was heaving. We was screaming something crazy. Abe was cursin' the hunters. And swearing at the murderers in the lab that peeled the poor bunnies' eye lids back and poured acid into their little eyes, just cuz they got nothing better to do and we got that ol' deer blind rocking back and forth and I climbed up on it like I was on top of the tallest tree a swaying in the wind, and finally it come toppling down and me in Abe's arms.

That's when I lay on top of him and felt him under me, and what happened after that seemed the most natural thing in the world, and it was, I guess in a way. After all, all them bunnies we let free done it one time or t'other. He kissed me, and the funny thing was, I started to cry. It startled me and scared him too. He pulled back, but I kept ahold of him, I wouldn't let go.

The funny thing is that I wasn't afraid – well, in a way I was, but not of him. You're going to think I'm really a bad girl when I tell you this, but I was crying because I wanted him so bad. And I don't mean wanted him like in a romantic way, flowers and hearts, but wanted him, if you know what I mean.

Wanted him to touch me, kiss me, wanted to feel his skin against mine, wanted his hands all over me, wanted to suck his breath from his lips, wanted

him inside me, wanted me inside him. Wanted him so much it scared me. And I started to cry – it was like I was drowning in these feelings – the waters were rising over my head and at first I felt like I was suffocating ... I breathed so hard like in a dream when you falling into the water and are swamped with fear that you can't breathe ... and then a lightness came to my head ... like I was floating and I realized I could breathe ... I was breathing underwater ... such a feeling of lightness and freedom and being in touch with myself, my body, him and the whole world.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I was truly lost, that I was a very bad girl to be feeling such things, but I didnt care – it was so delicious this feeling of delicious floating that just swept over my body, like every nerve in my body was being tickled and was on the verge of giggling.

I ain't never been drunk before, but if it was anything like this, I'd want to be drunk everyday – only it was a drunk, not like Uncle Willie when he drinks too much from his own whiskey still, and his face sags and his voice gets all slurry, but just the opposite.

Everything came clear – every nerve in my body was alive and tingling, open and aware in ways strange and wonderful. I smelled the grass beneath me pushing up into my back, heard every inch of my skin touching his, saw his breath and smelled his heart beat, and when I opened my eyes I saw straight up into the heart of the night sky, and when

I closed them, it was like I could hear the world breathe. It was then, I know, that my little Christine was brought to me.

So, you see, as hard as I tried, I just can't stop being bad. No matter what I do, it don't turn out right. I guess what Daddy says about my going to the place where bad people go is true.

~ ~ ~

they try to pray the devil out of me, but he's  
more stubbornner than anyone thought

i aint too proud to admit it, but I took to sneaking around to see Abe. He lived in a little house over on Jackson St. (that's Stonewall Jackson St., if you have to know), that he shared with some other people. And I took to going over there just cuz I liked to talk to him. He taught me how to play chess, and he'd get the funniest movies from the video store.

I don't mean, funny like comedies you'd fall-down laughing at, I mean funny like they was from France, or Italy, or Poland and places like that. We'd sit there in front of the TV in the living room on the big ol' leather sofa -- one of those things that you'd just sink down to the bottom in so you couldn't help but sliding together on. You couldn't make out what the people were saying in the movies on account they had different words for everything, but somehow you understood anyway ... and with the



light turned down an the flickering light from the screen in the dark room. I'd lean against Abe like it was the naturalist thing in the world (and it was), and I heard his breath rising and falling and his heart beating and with the darkness wrapped around us like a big comfy blanket, the voices would swirl around us like the lights on a carnival ride.

I dint never want to leave.

It was getting so I was running up and down the road more'n anybody could control, an word got roun i spose, and i figger Richard the THIRD he got to thinking, having done graduated from his Bible School College and being a fullfledged part-time minister and all (what he does with the other part of the time with the other part of his life, I guess he figures is his own business and no mind of the Lord's). Anyway, he figures he's going to help me see the straight way of the Lord and so one Sunday morning he shows up at my mamas house n rouses me up and takes me to the new church he was pasturing out on the edge of town. i couldnt very well say no especially with my two Granmas an my mom an stepdad standin there ... they was real hot on my gettin together with such a upstandin pill a the church.

We dint have much to talk about all the way over there n jus as we drove into the parking lot -- it was one of them parking lots that ain't no more than an empty field really, sept for a few trees here an there an some scrubs a grass thats not been squashed down by all the car tires -- he stops the car

an just sits there behind the wheel not gettin out. so i dont get out jus kinda wait n see what he has in mind. An then Richard the Third turns to me an sez "I've been thinking, Angel-Louise, and I've decided I was wrong to demand an answer to my question right away. You're young and haven't come fully to the Lord yet, and the idea of being spiritually committed might have been a little frightening to you. Well, I'm here to support your path in the Light of the Lord, however long it takes, as long as it is with me." And with that he gets outta the car not leavin me nothing to say.

Or least wise, no chance to say it.

This was one of them old-timie churches – not one of them new age-ee types that tries to make you feel good about yourself and tells you the Lord loves you just like you is, blemishes and warts and carbuncles and little hairs sproutin' from your ears and picking your nose and scratching your butt and all, but one of them that preaches that the Lord hates everything in this world that ain't godly because the world is run by the devil hisself, that is, the fellow they call Satan, (it's like even though the Lord created the world, somehow Satan got it over on God and re-possest-ed it, like God hadn't kept up on the payments or something), and it's our job as god-fearing Chrissians (never could figure out why we should be afeared of god – but that's another matter) – we should do everything in our power to renounce the world and come to the SPIRIT OF THE LORD. Which was all fine and good in theory, but mighty

difficult for folks like me and my daddy, mongst others.

But he took me to this church that was set back from the highway a bit, with all the cars pulled into an open field that must've got awful mushy when it rained cuz it wasn't paved or nothing, and even when it dint rain, what with all the cow paddies (which is a polite way to say cow shit, scuse my language). The church itself was a square white building with a little pointy steeple and a cross on top of that. There weren't no bell in the steeple but a loudspeaker which they played a tape recording of a bell outa that must've been pretty old because it was pretty scratchy – the recording, I mean, not the bell - - and sounded like something from one of those old black n white movies more'n a real, live bell, but I guess it saved them on bell maintenance and the salary of a bell ringer, and all.

So we was in the church listening to the preacher go on about the Saved and those that was Damned to wallow like pigs in the eternal slop of HELLFIRE. He was getting pretty colorful, and the people were working themselves up into a lather of Jesus-save-me's and Lord- take-me-now's (though I don't think they meant that literally, like that they wanted to actually be snatched up right at that moment, but more figuratively, like they wanted the Lord to accept them and take as they was right then, so they wouldn't have to go through the inconvenience of missing out on Sunday brunch at Howie's Barbeque Pit over on Jeb Stuart Road).

The preacher, he was getting to the part of one-hundred and forty-four thousand saved in heaven ... I thought it was pretty intresting how he could be so sure of the xact number, not one more or less, and thinking how there must be a whole lotta disappointed souls when the time come – having waited in line all this time only to be turned away at the last minute, sorta like you was waitin in line all night at Wall Mart for the Black Friday special on wide screen TVs and when they opened the door and the line snaked roun the store and you finally made your way up to the to eelectronics department to get yours, they was all sold out.

But then the minister, he turned to me and announced to everyone over my head something like, “Right now in our midst, we’ve got a girl who has been wandering the backroads of sin.”

He dint mention me by name, but I figured it was me he was talking about on account everyone was looking in my direction, and everybody else turning round in their pews and gawkin at me, and I was feeling this ol’, sinking guilty feeling cuz I had bin driving down the backroads so as not to be seen coming and going from Abe’s house, and I sat there staring straight ahead, not looking anyone in the eye and wondering how the hell that preacherman came so close to hitting the old coffin nail on the head.

“Come to Jesus,” he shouted. And I wasn’t quite sure if he was talking about me, or to me, so I looked around, and all the other folk were watching me real hard like they spected me to float up out of

my pew and rise up to Jesus right at that very second, which I would have been glad to do to oblige them, septin I dint know where exactly Jesus was, but I kind of gathered it was in the general vicinity of the preacher because he was standing there with his arms stretched out, and I found myself thinking I wouldn't mind going in the general vicinity of Jesus, but I dint really find myself wanting to go all the way to Jesus, if that meant gettin any closer to the Preacher-man, cuz he looked like a pretty seedy old coot, bless his heart – though I'm sure he was just doing his best.

But the stares of everybody in the congregation were pretty hard an it was like they just pushed up up outta my seat, so I got up, like I said, and took a step in towards the Preacher, and no sooner was I out in the aisle, but he shouted, "Brothers and sisters, take this young sinner into your bosoms and deliver her unto the arms of the Lord! And drive out the wickedness of the tempter!"

Only he said it with capital letters, like TEMPTER, like the fellow was right there in the room with us and he had me in his arms, and these people started doing a tug-of-war with me between theirselves and the devil, and my arms got to hurting so, I got to wishing they'd just let the devil win if it meant pulling me all to pieces, but just when I was thinking this, the preacher, he let up a wail that rooted everyone seats, real startled like, and he pushed through the crowd right at me, and I must admit it must've been a comical sight, if I hadn't

been so piss-in-my-pants scared -- everyone standing around wailing and wide eyed in some sort of fever of the holy spirit, and my jaw dropping open like I was catching flies (like my Granma used to say). And the preacher, he comes up to me with his arms outstretched.

I'd heard of the laying on of hands before and figured this is what he was fixin to do -- and deed, he did for a second. He put his hand on my forehead, throws his head back and wails up to the rafters like he sees somebody up there that nobody else can't see, "Lord, take this young sinner into your bosom, rescue her from the snares of the EVIL ONE!"

All of which I think is good and fine, except at that moment he shouts, "Satan, out!" and smacks me on the forehead so hard I rock backwards. I would've fallen down except the people behind me catch me in their arms, and just when I'm about to thank them cuz I think they're doing me a kindness, they push me on to my feet right back into the straightarm of an old lady who screams, "Satan, go away!" and she smacks me so hard, it makes my eyes water. You'd never guessed such an such an old lady with a big fat bottom shaped like a bell would have such a strong smack.

I fall backwards again, and again the crowd behind catches me and throws me back up into the arms of another Satan-Outer, and this one really wallops me, an harder than the others. I shouldn't have to tell you, my head was starting to hurt awful

bad (god-awful bad, I was about to say, but I dint want you to think I was making a disrespectful pun).

As soon as the tears started running down my face, the preacher cried out again, throwing his arms up to heaven like somebody goosed him with a cattle prod, "HALLELUJAH! She's crying tears of salvation." Then he turned to me again and told me, "Confess your sin, child. Cry out your wicked ways, repent and the Lord will love you!"

But I was blubbering so hard by this time, I couldn't say nothing, even though I was trying awful hard to tell them to stop smacking me. That's why I was crying, not because I was coming to the Lord. I dint want to go nowhere but far away from all those fool Lordsmackers.

"Let it out, child!" he screamed at me. "Let the Lord speak through you. Say the words of the Lord!" and they all kind of stood back, like I had the floor or something, like they say at town tonsil meetings, and I guess it was the devil that came over me then, I can't think of no other reason I did what I did, cuz I stopped my sobbing, caught my voice, and said very loudly and from deep in my chest, in a way down lower than I usually speak, sort of like a man's voice, just as the Preacher was saying "the Word of the Lord" again and sort of turning the microphone over to me, it wasn't like I said them, the words just kinda rumbled out of my chest, "LEAVE THAT GIRL ALONE AND STOP SMACKING HER!"

While them holy rollers was all gobsmacked, standing there like a herd of raccoons that's all been

caught in a flashlight out by the trash cans, I lit out the back door as fast as I could run, and I run all the way home, taking the backroads, of course, where I knew such god-fearing folk would never go to try to find me on account they was more afeared of the Devil than they was even of the Lord hisself, and where I knew I'd be safe, if not from the Devil, at least from the likes of them, all the time the words of that old song running through my head over and over again – the one we used to sing in church where my daddy used to take us before he got throwed out for running up and down the backroads hisself. "There's no saving a wrench like me."

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### *Some more stuff bout Abe*

I dint go home after that. I dint know what xactly to do. So I went over to Abe's house. He was renting a little place at the edge of town, where the cow pastures come right up to the people's yards and sometimes at night you can hear them mooing and when you look out you can see dark shadowy hulks dotting the lanscape.

The cows. Not the people.

When I got there, Abe was sitting on his couch, a big, soft leather one, just staring at the blank TV screen like he was watching somethin' real



'portant. And so I go in and I sit next to him, not saying a word, and we both sit there, staring at the blank screen, that big old black screen, not saying a word, like we was watching *Children in Paradise* (which is an old French movie about famous clown-fella that loves a girl but he cant never be with her) or *I'm a Cord* (that's the Eyetalian movie with the peacock in the fountain), and after a while I lean into him like we always used to, and we just sit there for the longest time, not talking, or breathing hardly (though we must've, obviously) but doing nothing but just staring at that big ol' screen like it was a black hol or something, just sucking us into it and all our thoughts and dreams and feelings, and then almost at the same time we looked at each other, and, well, we both knowed right there and then what we wanted and what we were going to do, and we dint care what the truth or consequences might be.

"Well, i reckon it's time for me to be getting home," I sez.

And he says he guessed it was.

And we get up and mosey out to the front porch, but real slow like neither one of us really wanted to get to the end point where i'd really be leavin.

Sometimes Abe said the strangest things to me. This time, he paused a long time on the porch, and we looked out across the field even though we couldn't hardly see nothing, cept the shadows of the trees and the grass sparkling here and there in the

moonlight. I dint hardly breathe, waitin for him to get it out.

"You know," he finally managed, "I said something the other day that wasn't quite true ... not accurate, I mean."

I was specting for him to tell me he'd told me a lie or something and now was confessing, and I was a little afraid of what he was going to say, but he went on and it was something totally different.

"I said we're so similar in so many ways ... thinking about how we both like lemons in our water ... and stuff like that ... but that's inconsequential ..."

I just loved it when he used them big words. Made me melt.

"What I should have said is, we're alike in ways metaphysical." (There he goes again!) "Ways it's hard to put my finger on. It's like we've both awoken from the same dream."

"How long you been woke up," I axed him.

"About one month ... ever since I met you."

"How long were you asleep?"

"About 32 and a half years."

Even though he said it with that half smile of his like it was that he was teasin, I stood there as still as a bug on the wall afraid to get squashed. Just stood there, afraid to breathe, like I was holding a puff ball and if I even breathed it'd blow away. Afraid to breathe, afraid to move, certainly not saying nothing, just listening to the crickets strumming their legs out on the grass, listening to

the trucks roll by on the highway a quarter mile away, feeling myself in my shoes and the hard insides of my shoes and wishing I'd of wore my shoes with the soft soles so my feet dint hurt so much ... just stood there, not saying anything, just staring at one another, not knowing what the other one was thinking or feeling, and maybe both of us afraid to ask because it would've meant the end of everything if it wasn't the right answer, but then finally, a cat ran across the porch, a stray neighbor cat, and I jumped like I saw a rat, almost clear off the porch, but Abe caught me, n at the same time let out a big laugh.

I axed him, "Do you think I'm bad?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"The people down at the church ..."

"I could never think that," he said.

And I know then that I loved him, not cuz he was right (cuz I knew he werent) but cuz he believed what he said, the poor stupid deelooped fool, but I couldn't say nothing because it was like my heart was caught in my mouth.

"Close your mouth," he told me. "You'll catch flies."

And when I did, that's when he kissed me. And I kissed him back. Kissed him long. The longest kiss in the whole world. The longest kiss that ever was. And I'm not shamed to tell you this – though I should be, but I guess it's a sign of what a bad girl I am that I'm not – but I kissed him till my head was swimming, till my breath ran out, till we both fell off

that porch, and we lay in the grass, lay there with the jumping bugs and the crickets, and that darn stray cat's eyes shining at us from under the porch, and we lay there till nearly the sun came up. Then we went inside and lay down some more.

I should be ashamed to tell you this, but I guess it's just a sign of just how bad I am that I'm not. In a way, I'm so proud. But like my granny used to say, pride goeth before the Fall, which I never quite unnerstood till autumn come and the leaves started to fall and we fell off that porch into the Spendid Grass, just like it says in the Good Book.

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## wheel of destiny

After I'd been goin' over to Abe's for a while, I got to figurin' I oughta do something for protection, ya know, so I snuck into my mama's room one day. She was passed out on the bed, smelling of liquor and snorting like a freight train going by. (Guess it runs in the family. Both my Granmas snore like they was semi-trucks haulin' timber down a mountain road. Sure hope I don't snore like that when I get older). Whenever she was passed out like this, we never said it was on account of the half-bottle of store brand vodka she'd gone through since breakfast, but just that she was "tired" an' had to

take a nap. Since Daddy'd gone, Mama'd been tired quite a lot lately.

I opened the drawer and there they was -- the little magic pills, like Mama used to call 'em. I dint feel bad about takin' 'em since I knew Daddy wasn't around enough to do nothin' with Mama. He was too busy spending all his time with the church ladies.

There was an old bottle of baby aspirin in the back of the medicine cabinet -- little tiny pills made specially for a baby's throat -- and they was the same size and nearly the name color as Mama's birth control pills, so I switched 'em. I took out a whole wheel of my mama's pills and put in their place the little baby aspirins.

It was close work on account of the pills being so tiny and my mama rumbling away on the bed like a saw mill, and I'm standing there, not really knowing what I'm going to do with these things, not having a clear idea of what I'm planning to do, though somewhere in the back of my mind, I must've seen clear through the trees to where I was headed, maybe just dint want to admit it to myself, wouldn't have come and out and said it, and would have denied it if you had said it, but there I was, in any event, standing in front of the dresser my mama inherited from her Granma, digging through its drawers that was so crammed full of stuff you couldn't get the drawers open -- my mama had her clothes and pictures of us when we were little and papers , just bills and receipts from years gone by, all jammed in there together -- and I was laying out

the little pills on top of the dresser ... one little teeny-weenie pill for my pile, one teeny-weeny aspirin into the wheel. Click, turn the wheel. One teeny-weenie birth control pill for my pile. One teeny weenie aspirin into the wheel. Click. And so on through the whole blessed wheel of destiny.

One time my mom started awake and near gave me a heart attack. "Angel-Louise, what're you doing over there?"

I swear, I dint know what to say. My tongue caught in my throat. I thought I was a dead dog, for sure. But then she offered me up: "You ain't stealing money from my wallet are you?"

As funny as it sounds, her accusin' of stealin' money was my salvation, so I 'fessed up to one crime to hide the other. "Yes, um', I'm sorry. I dint mean nothing. Just I need a little money to out with Loopey later on. I'm sorry, mama. You was sleeping, and I dint want to wake you. I know how ... tired ... you get."

"That's alright honey," she tells me. "You just ask from now on. Don't take too much. Just ask from now on." And she plopped her head back down like she was dead.

"Yes, 'um," I says and hurried up even faster then, cuz I dint want her really waking up and finding me still going through her wallet. And in hurrying up I might've got the little pills mixed up. I made sure to scoop all them little pills up off the top of the dresser. I kinda swept them into my hand and made sure none of them dropped onto the floor. I

made sure to take some money from my mama's wallet too so as she wouldn't get suspicious of me.

Then I went out on the front porch holding my little clutch of birth-control pills. They was so important to me. They meant I could do whatever I wanted to with Abe, without nobody knowing anything. I guess that only shows what kinda girl I was – one that snuck around, wanting what I wanted but not wanting anybody to know, and not wanting no consequences that come of it. I guess it's from that kind of thinking that all my troubles come from. But that was later. Right now, I was hunched over my little treasure loaf (though why they call it that, I can't tell you – maybe it was from back in the day when people dint have even a slice of bread to eat and a whole loaf was a treasure) and counting them, almost like each one was a diamond that numbered the days Abe and I would be together and not even thinking how the end of the counting would be the end of those days, my time with Abe, and my world.

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at my granmas

After the incidence at the church, my Daddy dint want nothin' else to do with me. Said I was uncorrugated. So, I went an' moved in with my Granmas. That's how Chrissean folk believe in dealing with stuff they don't believe should be happenin' ... they x communion cake it, which is a

fancy way of saying, they pretend like it dont exist. So my mother snuggles up with her bottle of vodka in the middle of the day, my father's off ministering his church ladies, and I'm the bad one who is so bad that I can't even be under the same roof with none of them.

But my Granmas are such wonderful people. "I don't care what you done," my Granma BettyLou tells me. "You'll always be my little girl." I couldn't help myself, I nearly broke down and cried right there. Sweet as her cake.

Granma LucyMae, she takes me aside and tells me they don't have too many rules, exceptin' that every morning we'll take a slice of our daily bread together."

That dint seem too hard, so I said, "Yes'm."

But I've got to tell you something, and you're going to think the first night I notice something I ain't never noticed before and that was Granma LucyMae snores like a freight train coming through, bless her heart. I ain't never heard nothing like that before. I swear, there ain't nothin' compared with the rumbling in that little house once she lay herself down to sleep.

I was lying there in the little back room Granma Lucymae fixed me up in. It was the room I slept in whenever I went over to visit with them. It was really LucyMae's, but she said she'd sleep on the couch round the corner in the other room. I said I dint wanna put her out none, but she said it werent



no nevermind, I'd be needin' privacy seein as I was a young lady now.

It was awful nice of Granma LucyMae but that little room was was as sufferin' as a hotbox – it dint get no air coming through that window, and between the heat and Granma LucyMae's snorin' so loud it seemed like the walls was shakin', I dint get no sleep that first night.

The next day I went over to my Uncle Willie's. "Hi, ya, Uncle Willie." He was in his work room. He had the chanter to his bagpipe off and was replacing the reed. The bagpipe was laid out on his little workbench like some dead sea-creature with all its tentacles asplay.

"Well, if it ain't our little wayward girl. Whatcha up to, punchkin?" (He'd always called me "punchkin." He said it was cuz I was a cross between a munchkin and a pumpkin. It was alright that he called me that. He dint mean nothing by it but meant it teasing and luvn like.)

"Ah, nothing. Thinking about heading over to the swap meet at the Radium Drive-in." I had heared people talk about how they used to show movies there, but nowadays they just run a swap meet every 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Saturday of the month.)

"Yeap, they got a lot of stuff over there."

"Wondering if I could borrow your pick up truck."

"Heard you moved into LucyMae's and BettyLou's. But you really gotta go and buy a new bedroom suite?"

"Naa, it's not that, just gotta pick up a few things."

When I got back, an pulled in, he took one look at what I got in the back of his truck -- a fan the size of an airplane propeller.

"Spose you'll be needin help settin that thing up," he said.

So, Uncle Willie helped me set up that fan in the window, and that was the first night I got some peace from the rumblin' in the other room. The whoosh of the air over me, the sound of the engine and the sound of Granma Lucy Mae's little perfume bottles shakin' and rattlin and tinklin on the dresser across the room like so many windchimes in a twister drowned out her snoring.

I just laid there for the longest time, staring up at the ceiling, letting my eyes wander round the room, magining shapes in the shadows, dreaming dreams bout Abe, and for some strange reason, I kept on thinking of that little boy in Winnie Pooh, Christopher Robin (which come to think of it is where my own litel Christiana Robin's name came from, I guess.)

So here I was at my Granmas', thrown out by my own mom and dad, who wasn't much of a family to begin with. Ceptin maybe the one I was fixin to be makin for myself but dint know yet.

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## I yam what I yam

My life's been nothing but a bunch of tag ends and ragged pieces all thrown together with no order or sense to them, wouldn't even know where to start sorting them out. The things I've been through, the trouble I've seen, the trouble I've caused, just like my daddy always usta to say, I'm untrustworthy, inconsistent and hypocritical and wouldn't be no surprise if I come to no good an ended up in the place where the bad people go.

I done so many things wrong, I'm only hoping I can be given some time to set them right. I have all these ideas about how a person should behave hisself but I can't seem to follow them. I know I've done things that're wrong, but at the time I was doing them, they felt so right at the time even tho I knew they were wrong, 'gainst everything I was ever taught. I just couldn't help it. I was weak, I spose. Or maybe I should have a fillosophy that was closer to the way I behaved.

I remember watching TV when I was a kid. It was a cartoon show. Something one of them cartoon characters said -- it was Popeye -- stuck with me: He always usta to say, "I yam what I yam, and that's all that I am." Well, that's all how it is, ain't it? I done what I done. I done stuff that was stinky and stuff that I shouldn't've, but I can't change nothing. Can't go back and do none of it all over again. Can only try to do better as I go on down this road I'm on.

There weren't but one way this could end, and that was bad – bad for me, bad for Abe and bad for everyone. I dint even know what I was doing in those days. Jes that everything in my body seemed to be pulled to him, every thought I had pulled to him like a magnet and each one of my thoughts was like a little metal filing that gradually all pulled in one direction -- his direction -- like one of them etcha-sketches all forming the letters to spell his name. Before he came, the world was flat, the roads went from here to there, and I could put my hand on everything I wanted. But when he came into my life, it was like the magnolias caught fire and the road to his place was a highway to heaven.

After school everyday I went over to his house and dint come home till late at night. I told my folks one day, when my mommy asked, "Where're you bin so late," I told her, "Out studying at Loopey's," making up a lie real quick, and my Daddy shot back 'out looking up from his plate, "All that studyin' you're doing these days, you outghta be coming home with a big fat ..." -- and he paused to chew something that nearly gave my heart a stop -- "A," he finished. I suspected then that he suspected, but I dint care. Just made up my mind to be more careful.

What'd we do? That's easy to tell. After we stopped meeting at the Waffle House, I'd scoot around to his place. He had this little house over on Stonewall Jackson St. and I'd pull my car around to the back, where my Daddy wouldn't see it if he was

driving by, an you'll unnerstan' if I don't go into details, but you should keep in mind that it wasn't the sex that held us together (an there's no reason to keep this part secret cuz we did start doin IT on a pretty reglar basis).

But it was something else, too. Abe'd be at his desk, and I'd come in and find him at his desk, correcting papers, or maybe on the couch reading a book, and sometimes he'd go on reading, and I'd pick a book off his shelf and read along side of him, and we'd get to a passage, one of us, that seemed specially – I don't know – somethin' ... special, I guess you'd say, and he'd nudge me and say, "Here, listen to this," and he'd read me something from somebody like Christy Rossetti.

I can even recall one particular poem:

Remember me when I am gone away  
to the silent land,

or somethin like that. And then she went on to say that she dint want her fella to member her at all, but wanted him to forget her so he wouldn't be sad. But be happy.

It was a beutifull poem but when I thought bout it, I dint much care for her. She seemed too much like a wuss. I'd want my fella to love me so fierce he'd never forget. Hell with whether he was sad or not! (Scuse my language.) I figured that if we don't love each other to 'member each other when we're outa sight, then what's the point?

There was another poem that Abe read, by a Scottish fellow. "I will love you till the rocks melt with the sun," it went. Now, that stuck closer to home. Seemed like a mighty powerful love that would love that strong.

After we were done with our reading, we'd go into his bedroom. I can't tell you what it was like with him. There was the obvious stuff, of course, but it was more n that. There was the lying next to him, skin on skin, so quiet it was like floating on a raft, like our soles were pouring into each other. It was like my whole life I'd been living in one of those plastic bubbles they put people who can't live in the outside world and don't never feel what's it's like to smell the air off a wet pine forest, or feel the sun rising on a cool spring morning, an I was that bubble girl who all of a sudden stepped out into the sweet cool air and onto the dewey grass, and even if I knew I was gonna die for doing it, it was the most wonderfulest moment in my life, by which I mean a moment filled with starlight wonder.

Our heads were swimming with the poetry. I swear it was like we was drunk, or we was opium eaters floating on a cloud of dreams in "a savage place ... holy and enchanted" (as another poem had it), and me his demon lover (as it turnd out).

That's all it was -- just a moment, just a quick breathin in, a glimpse of glory, and then it was gone. Afterwards, we'd lie there in the halflight of the day that was fading away and he'd pull out a book and prop it up on my tummy and read to me, and I could

feel his words rumble through me, tumble around me, tingle me.

But I'm getting way too graphical. That was then. This is now. When its different.

Then, I dint have a care. If you'd'a told me I was gonna get killed out on the highway on the way home, I wouldn't of blinked. I'd've just smiled at you. You poor fool. You think it matters what happens to me after this? No, care was something I couldn't do, and careful was something that wasn't in me at the time to be.

Now, I'm careful. Now I have something to be careful for, but then, it was like I was riding down the roller coaster over at the county fair at Five Points. My stomach floating up into my chest, and my heart in my throat, and my brain coming out the top of my head. Then there was no caring, no taking care, no being careful.

There was just the fall like a bungy jump into the can yon of love. And the dizziness that went along with it. My whole world was cradled inside those small walls. It seemed like those few nights we lived a whole lifetime, though now it seems like a whole other life, as far away from us now as the age of the dinosaurs, and I don't want to count the days to see how short a time it realy was. But the funny part is, I kin begin to tell you what we did together, but what we meant to one another ... I can't rightly put my finger on it.

I member one night, it was early in the spring an the air crisp that we went outside wrapped in our

blanket together to sit under the moon. It was one of them soft, half-moons, like somebody left a nightlight on in the other room.

We was sitting on the grass in the middle of the clearing on the lawn, listening to Mindy Smith on the stereo from the house – Abe'd propped the speakers up on the window ledge -- and for some damned reason or another, I got it into my head to stand up and dance.

I was naked as a june bug dancing there in the light of the blue moon. Dancing for Abe. Dedicating a dance to him. To us. The night was sweating and the air felt like it covered me with a soft dewey blanket, so I dint feel naked at all but like I was covered in the blanket of his love.

It was stupid to think so, I know now, cuz he hadn't said nothing, but that's how I felt. Now, I'm a big girl – Reuben's neck, Abe's called it onct -- and not much of a dancer, so the sight of me prancin roun must not have been a pretty sight, but he sat there with his legs crossed and with a kind of half-smile on his face and watched me in his booda pose the whole time, jest letting me be me, lettin me do what I wanted to do, what was in me to do, not telling me what was right or wrong or what Jesus would do but jes lettin me be me.

And if what I wanted was to follow a firefly's light -- which is really just a glow painted on their butts, by the way -- that's what he was gonna let me do. The grass was clumpy and prickly under my feet when I bent down and kissed him, and we took each



other again, and ... well, I won't go into details here, but that grass was awful prickly and stabbed into my back and butt somethin' awful.

It was in them days that we got to sittin up nights having these long rambling conversations with one another, while the whole night away we would – and one time, Abe loud how he could get into big trouble for being with me. On account of my being such a youngun, and him being so much older.

"Ain't no never-mind to me," I tole him, but he said it would matter to a lot of other people. He could get sent up for raping a statue, which he dint consider it, since our being together was totally consensuous, but that to the rest of the world, I was real dangerous to him, like a loaded gun.

(Which wouldn't make much sense to the folks 'round here, seein hows most everybody goes roun with loaded guns in the back of their pick-up trux and don't shoot nobody they don't mean to, but up north, where Abe'd come from, I guess guns is going off on their own all the time that their owners don't mean em to, which must've bin what Abe was furring to.)

He said, what we'd done was real foolish, that he could be charged with a contribution to the delicacy of a miner, namely me, and he could be put in jail, or worse, and I could be sent up to juvie hall as a delinquent. Now, was I steamed when I heard that! I ain't never been delinquent before in my life. Bad, maybe, but not delinquent.

But none of this mattered to us at the time.  
An sure dint stop us from doing what we was doing.

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## That's my baby

We was lying in in the back of Abe's V-dub bus one night. It was sweatin hot an we'd drove up to the lake an gone in for a skinny dip and then lay out to cool off.

I cant hardly say, come to think of it, that we did nothing else. Tell the truth, there wasn't much else to do in McCauleysville. Other than drive down to the Dairy Queen, or over to the honky tonks on the innerstate ... but we couldn't hardly do that, seein' as Abe wasn't supposed be foolin' 'round with me no way, anyhow, and it'd be years before I'd be able to get in, legalways. So most've the times, I jes run on down the road and sneak in at his place through the back way, and I dint mind much, anyway, that we dint go out at all. I loved him so, I was happy to have him all to myself. That little place he had down by the river was the loveliest place I could ever imagine. It was a palace for me. A little rickety, raggedy-ass shack, but to me it was the Taj My Hall. It was a pleasure dome, like that fellow wrote -- I don't remember right now who it was, but

Abe, he read it to me – where Alf, the sacred river, run down to a sunless sea.

Abe was awful sensitive 'bout stuff like poetry and philosophy, an shit. I guess it was only fittin' that he was, seein' that he taught it an' all. But we'd be lying there ... after -- well, afterwards, of course – sweating like a couple horses after a three-mile race, and he'd reach over and pick up a book and set in reading. It startled me at first, I'll tell you. I dint know what weird stuff he was up to. But after a bit, I come to like it. I can't say as I remember exactly what he read to me. It was like we was floating on a rubber raft in the middle of the PeeDee River, like it was like a drug that we'd drunk -- we of flashing eyes and floating hair, just like the fella wrote.

Well, one night we was lying there and a big bug was crawlin' up me ... now, remember, we'd just done ... what we was doin' ... so I wasn't wearing much in the way of coverin or nothin ... and this bug is crawling around on my unmentionables ... so I give a scream and when I go to brush it off – no, I gotta 'mit, I ain't being truthful. I was gonna kill it. I was gonna squash it like, well, like the bug that it was nosing 'round where it oughtin be, but then Abe, he caught my hand and told me bugs got rights too.

“Whadya mean?” I asked him.

“Just because it's small doesn't mean it isn't sentient being endowed by its creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

“I’m sorry, Abe. It ain’t got the right to be crawlin’ ‘roun on my privates.”

But I gotta add-mit, I loved it when he used big words like that. Sentient. Have you ever heard such a word? That little critter was sentient. Which means it was able to feel stuff, like being squashed and all, and if it was able to feel something, then that means it had rights, just like you and me, not that it could vote or nothing, Abe dint go that far ... well, not quite, though he did think that maybe they oughta be represented by humans who cared for them. He wouldn’t use the word “owned” he hated that word.

“They aren’t your slaves,” he’d say. His dog, a thick, bouncing Akida, which is a big, hairy dog that looks something like a husky that’s been caught in a drive-through carwash – on account of the heat in Carolina, Skyedance he was called (tho I told him he spelled it wrong). This dog jus mostly laid around during the day pantin’ like he’d just gone for a ten-mile run. I thought maybe the poor critter would feel better with a shave, so as he could cool off, but Abe, he said that would be violating his companion’s dignity. That’s what he called his dog. It wasn’t a pet ... hell, no, you’d better not let Abe hear you call Skeydance a pet ... he’d squash you like a bug! He said that dog was closer to him than any human, understood him better too, ceptin me of course; it was his friend, his companion, his baby, his child, his son.

Considering how things turned out, them words came back to haunt me like a blackbird you heard outside your bedroom window piercin' your dreams all night long.

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## the valley of eevil

Now, I'm gonna tell you bout somethin that happened that aint really nice nor pretty though you might think so at first, considring how it all starts.

Like I was sayin, we wuz laying back in his V-dub bus, me n Abe. We'd drove back to his place an parked not too far from the house. The door was open an we waz lookin up at the stars and the trails of light of the airplanes comin outta spartanburg -- they'd drift real slow across the black sky like angels takin a leisurely flight seeing where they might could light -- the fireflies in the trees over across the road their landin lights an the crickets their airtrafix controlers.

I ain't too proud to say that we'd dun what the bunnies do an i wasnt shamed of it neither since it seemed natural like and right an afterwards like it says in the huemin bilologee book as we was laying there i could feel the endolphins swim all over me an i spect it was the same for Abe too ... witch was maybe why we had these funny thoughts bout

angles and fireflies an why even tho we wasnt long at that it seemed like it mightve been a thousand years for all i know tho i spect not cuz before too long there come some noise from down the road a bit.

An ol pickup truck was comin up the road real fast at us. It came so fast we dint have time to do nothing -- but jes look at it with our mouths wide open like was a couple ijiots or somethin. It was comin so fast i first thought it was gonna hit but then i heard th breaks slam on and it throu up a bunch of dust n gravel and skidded to a stop right in front of us an out jumps 3 fellas. One was ol Stevie Macnab -- he climbs down from the drivers seat with this shit chewin grin on his face an on the othr side is somebody just makes my heart jump -- my very own Richard the THIRD. I hadnt seen the THIRD for a long time ... not since he took me to church that time an i know youl forgive me if i tell you i thought i was shut of him for good. But here he was climin outta Stevie Macnab's pickup an in a way that dint look too friendly. The other was a dark shape I couldn't rightly see -- but he was a big fellow -- he kinda hung behind the others, but when he moved in front of the pickups lights, i seen he had a funny scar on his lips, an big, soft hands like a girls.

i climb out of the van and there they was standing in the lights of the pick up truck like shadows in the night. they seemed like they had halos around them but i got this feeling that they weren't no angels bringing messages from heaven.

The truck engine turned off and the lights shined into the van. i heard the crickets chirp. Somewhere a magpie called. Off in the far distance a dog barked. Everything else was real still just like it was before Hurrikane Offeelya.

Then a voice that i recognized called out "Hey, ... " and here i'm not gonna to say the word cuz it was the n-word ... and i won't spoil the memory of my dear friend, the man i loved with even repeating what somebody else said but you get the idea. But the voice that yelled it out said, "Come on out here. We wanna talk with ya."

We stepped out - the two of us as naked as adam and eve on the first night ... maybe not as inncent as they was but inncent of meaning any harm to anyones ... and thats when i saw something that make me plumb go cold an numb all over

Richard the THIRD was standing there in the lights ... i couldn't hardly make out his face but it was him alright -- i recognized his face real clear only it lookd like one of them faces that people make when they're like fooling roun at summer camp and they put a flash light weird like up against their face. Thats how the the light from the headlights was playing a mean trick on his face

An then comin up behind him was Stevie Macnab and behind him i could make out the shadow of some huge fellow that i ain't never seen before ...an i didn rightly make out his face but i could see his hands -- they was like little girl hands

Abe started to say somthin like "You boys better get out of here ... We don't want any troub ... " but then Stevie MacNab stepped towards us and at first it peared he had somethin in his hand looked like a short pipe but then i saw it were a shotgun that we heard make an awful click like he was loading its chamber and Abe stopped talkin right in his tracks...

"You ain't in no position to be telling us what to do, boy." Stevie said boy right back at Abe, only when he said it, it sounded downright nasty. Then he smacked Abe hard against the head with the shotgun barrel and Abe went down.

The big guy gave a little girl giggle an his hands fluttered up to his mouf like moths in front of the pickups lights.

And i flew to Abe ... i think i must of been screaming ... i dont rightly remember .... but i was tellin them to leave us alone ... i was crazy n scared n mad all at the same time.

That's when the THIRD grabbed me and pulled me off of Abe and Steve Macnab whipped a cord or somethin roun Abe real quick like he was roping one of the steers on his daddy's farm .. an before he was done he bent down and made a quick circling movment with his hands around Abe's middle part and then walked away to the pickup truck an looped the rope round his towing knob ...

I was screamin at this time," Let me go ... let us go ... PLEASEGODLETUSGO! We ain't done nothin."



But the THIRD he just looked at me an the pickuplights shining red in his eyes an said I'd too done somethin. I was guilty of the SIN OF FORNICATION ... an but that ABE was guilty of much worse ... because he was a child lester an' i was the child ... and what's more he was BLACK.

"Angel-Louise, you have disappointed me. I would have waited for you. But Satan tempted you beyond redemption. For you, there is a chance for repentance. But for this son of Satan who bears the mark of Cain, there is none."

He bent my wrist and forced me down to the ground ... i could taste the dust rise into my nose and the wet grass smell ... I axed him then, i beggd him, "Do anythin ya wanna ta me ... just don't hurt Abe ... "

"Don't worry," he tole me. "We got somethin for the both of you." But I was in a pretty bad way, rockin' back and forth, not so much scared for mysel but so crazy upset what they done to my beautiful man. I was near outta my mine, I swear to god i was.

It was a struggle to say anything, and I just see the three of them, the THIRD and Stevie and the big guy with the girl's hands moving around just outta the light and then the next thing I know they're all over me. They'll taking off my clothes and they're on top of me and I'm screaming. Only the way I am, the state I'm in at the time, it's like I'm watching somebody else screaming. They've got their hands all over me, and I'm screaming and kicking and the three of them are laughing like, and when the THIRD was pulling my panties off, I kicked him in the face,

and then he comes back and slaps me and then its like i see him for the first time.

"What're you doing!?" the THIRD screams.  
"You aren't supposed to do that! I always knew there was something wrong with you Angel-Louise. You've never learned a proper woman's role."

And then Stevie pulls something out like i never seen before. I seen something like it ... it was a big man's part ... but not like this ... made outta plastic like, and hooked up to a belt contraption. And Stevie pushes it at the THIRD and sez real eager like, "Teacher wi this."

The THIRD, he takes it and says to Stevie, real polite like, like he was in Sunday school, "Well, St. Paul did say it was well for a man not to touch a woman, so I guess I wouldn't really be touching her would I?"

There was something in his face i ain't never seen before ... something mean ... something hateful ... that was hidden before all the soft talk bout the bible and gods love ... but now he was laying into me real hard. He was hitting me in the face again and again, and at the same time he was trying to push inside me, and like I was trying to shift my hips and protect my face and head at the same time and he's shouting to Stevie and the big guy with the girl's hands, "Hold her still!" and then to me, "Hold still, you stupid bitch!" and stuff like that. In all my squirming an scootin to get out from under him i done push myself across the clearing on my back till finally he got me pressed upside the tree stump

where I couldn't move no farther, and he thinks he's finally got me and just as he's pushing in I reach up like to pull myself out of his way one more time and my hand falls on that thing he's pushin at me.

I was pretty far outta my head with crazy fear and I was seeing things kinda like in strobes ... you know, one flash at a time. So one strobe was the THIRD standing there. Another strobe was me yankin it outta his hans, an another strobe was me hitting him cross the head with it and it makin a loud thud like a screen door slamming, and him sinkin to his knees his jaw hangin open like a bull thats just bin poleaxd an with this look on his face like all of a sudden it curs to him he dint want to be doin' this atall, but it was a revelation that come too late, because just when he's havin' it, an then nother flash of the strobe and me runnin at him pushin that thing in his mouth with all my mite ... screemin an jammin it down his throat as deep as it kin go.

An then another strobe an the THIRD was chokin an grabbin his throat an clawnin up the groun an Abe with the rope around his man part and i guess when steveie macnab saw the THIRD squirmin roun on the ground like a dog with the hydrophoby, panic set into his litel brain an he figgerd none of what they had plannd werent such a good idea anymore like he must of thought it was when the THIRD first put it to him ... an he jumps into the cab of the truck an i forget too late what its connected to and i scream an my scream mixes with Abe's an i see him dragging down the road till finally

he gets torn loose from the rope and he just lies there bloody and mounin and i run to him an holdhim and cover him with my tears like that was gonna do some good ... but i knew it wasnt.

Then all of a sudden the next strobe was me staggering through the woods and stumbling up on the road. And fallin down in the rain ditch nexta the road an then standin in the middle of the highway wavin my arms like a naked crazy girl. They say the 18wheeler comin roun the ben most smashed me flatter than a june bug but i dont member none of that.

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### st james firmery

And sure enough, when I come in, there's my Granma sitting at the table, and she dint say nothing, not about my bloody knees or bout my skirt half hiked up showing my bare butt or the smell of puke all over me, but stead she puts a cup of coffee down in front of me, and she says, "Pick a slice of Daily Bread, there, Angel-Louise. Lets see what it says," so with my hands shaking so I cant evn feel through the fingertips, and I pick one and drop it 3 times as i try to read it. "Though I walk though the valley of death," it says, "I shall fear no evil, for the Lord my God, is with me."

That made me feel good, so I wiped the snot from my nose and put some sugar in my coffee. It was from that little sitdown that I had with Granma Lucy Mae over the slices of Daily Bread that I finally got my courage up to face the mess I was in. So, after I was done talkin' to Granma Lucy Mae over her slices of Daily Bread, we called the sheriffs and told 'em what'd happened to me and Abe an all ... and they said they already got a 'port and done arrested Abe for a salten battery an that he was being hold under gard in the hospital on account his victims done protected themsels. So we went down to St. James firmery and i saw my sweet baby there laid out on a long white table, so sweet, pale as the color of the sheets they'd done thrown over him, and near cold as death. They was taking him inta the operations, said he might could die, an i prayed that weren't so cuz i knew that i could look the wide world over and never find so sweet a man like him, bless his heart.

When Abe got outta the operations room i went inta see him, but it seemed like he dint want nothing to do with me -- he just turned his face ta the wall like it was my fault what'd happen to him.

After that the police done put questions to me bout what did happend an i told em best i could that it werent Abe that done nothing wrong, it was the others that tacked us but they dint seem to give my say so no credince seeing how it was just a black man on this side and the Reverend Butts boy that was on the other side, but in the end they cided to

just right the whole thing off as a dispute and self-defence between the bunch of em, an that it'd probably be best if Abe movd hisself outta town once he got outta the hospital cuz thered be a lotta folk aroun that wouldnt take too kindly to a black fella that'd tacked a pack of white boys.

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## pretty in pink

I hadn't heard from Abe for the longest time. But it was gettin' so I had to talk to him, seein' as I couldn't get up in the morning without pewkin.

I thought in my mind again and again what did happen an what part of it i was to blame for. And whether i was to blame or not, i was mighty sorry, no matter.

Of a sudden, it made me ashamed to think how I'd got naked in front of him. Don't get me wrong -- it weren't my body that I was shamed he'd seen. I'd been naked before ... like everyday in the shower, and when we have gym at school where there's scads of people to look at your naked butt. I don't care 'bout that. I'd troop up and down the road naked -- ain't no nevermind to me. It was that I'd showed him myself -- my Self, that I'd got naked in my soul in front of him, and he'd smiled at me like that so I thought he liked what he was seeing, and so

I showed him more, like the prance of the seventeen veils, more and more, little by little, but all the time, the good Lord only knows what he was thinking of me now, what with him all disfigured an all.

I had a dream roun bout that time. He reached out his hand to me like a long distance message from another country, like he was already gone, and maybe I would've been upset if I hadn't knowed it already.

"Do you hate me?" I asked him.

"I could never hate you," he said. He was looking at me with these little, black ball-bearing eyes that looked too little for his head, with that little half-smile plastered on his lips like it was a mask, and I realized they was as cold as one of them e-gwanas down at the feed store that Mr. Reilly keeps behind the counter, hardly moving all day long, just licking out with a flick of the tongue and watching you with these eyes that take everything in but ain't touched by nothing.

I'd always thought of him as being so fiery, so warm hearted, but now with my fire damped down and near flickering out, he was as cold as a flat rock on a winter day. He dint have no warmth of his own, he just feeding off of mine.

He pursed his lips. "So, what are you planning to do now?" he asked, landing on the you in such a way that I knew there was no us -- just him over there sailing away across the water. And me going down with the Titanic.

Then he looked at his watch and said he had a 'pointment to keep. Like he had someplace else to go. Like he was on a tight schedule.

He stood there, waiting for something ... maybe something to tell me. Tell me something bout me being alright or our baby being alright. I admit I kinda found myself hoping that he'd be taking me up out of that plastic form fitted booth, lifiting me up like I see Richard Gere hoist up Deborah Winger once in Officer and a Genelman and carry me outta there ... me an' little Christiana Robin.

"Anybody ever ax you bout us?" he asked me and it wasn't in his words, but it was in his voice ... You talk to anybody? You tell anybody? About me?

I told him I dint tell no one, and he looked hard at me for a moment, and then he smiled. "That's alright," he said. "You can tell anyone you want."

And so he left me sitting there in the Waffle House, having never raised his voice, never blamin me, and the sickly sweet smell of the syrup rising up 'round me till it made me want to disgurgitate my breakfast.

I woke up in a awful sweat an went outside. An i dunno if i was really talkin to him or if was jes a dream but it's funny, sometimes all your emotions get in the way of your seeing, and then something happens, and you step back, and you just see ... you see so clear. And I dint feel nothing, standin outside there, litel clumps of dirt creepin up tween my toes, cept like a wind was blowin' through me. An it felt



good, not good to be alone, to be left like that, but good to have the question answered, all my questions and queries lifted from me an i knew what i had to do.

So the next mornin I went down to the pharmacy in the Walmart in McCauleysville, even tho i was gonna have to face down ol' snoop Tammy Hall, who all of a sudden was so friendly and curious like 'bout what I'd been doing with myself, and I tol' her I was jes' runnin' some errands for my Mama, she and my Daddy was gettin' back together, an' I might be 'specting a little brother.

"Huh, huh," little Miss Nosey Shitface says as she slides the pregnancy kit across the counter at me – face up, so everybody could see it, like she was daring me to touch it, like it was a hot loaf comin outta Granma LucyMae's oven. Jus waiting for me to grab it up and shove it in my purse run out of there like I was some sort of scarlet lady, which is, of course, what I felt like and what I wanted to do -- run outta there, I mean -- but instead, I just stood there and let that old pregnancy kit flash between us like a neon light on a moonless night, like it weren't no never-mind to me, and chatted with her for the longest time, till the line behind me stretched all the way past the kiwis in the produce section and half way to the pyramid display of manure that was on sale, till finally some old flippertigibbet manager comes up behind her and axs if there's a problem, and I say I'm jes' catching up with an old friend, thank ya, kindly, and smooth as a goober sliding

down yer throat, I reach over real slow like and pick up my package and glide outta there myself.

Not like i really needed to go to all that trouble or when i got home that pretty little pink plus sign dint tell me nothing i dint alreddy know.

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If its such a god bless decision, why am I  
shakin like a soaked dog?

The day I went to the clinic, it was raining one of those spring drenchers that we get back home. Humongous raindrops the size of baseballs were bouncing off the ground like they was coming back up to hurt you, and it's no good standing under an umbrella because the rain bounces back up angry-like from the ground and soaks you from the bottom up. I was dripping wet before I even got to the clinic. Loopey offered a drive me and borrowed her mom's car, telling her it was to drive to school on account of it being so rainy. We was hoping school wouldn't call our homes; but I needn't of, cuz her mom was going to work, and by the time the registrars office rung up my house, my mom would be taking her nap and wouldn't hear anything.

I dashed out to the car so's not to get wet, but I shouldn't of even bothered cuz by the time I even

got to the car, I was soaked clear through, my hair hanging down like a cat that's been thrown in the river, and I was shivering, not so much from the cold – cuz it wasn't cold at all-- but just from what I was gonna do. I ain't proud to tell you this, but I gotta tell the truth, I figure it's the only way I can get past it all.

Loopey drove us down the innerstate through the rain, and it was like we were traveling through time, with the rain coming down so hard and the mist rising from the heated blacktop. It seemed like we was traveling over a black bridge between worlds, and, and in a way we were cuz I was passing between the world I'd known and the one that would become, though I wasn't looking forward to what was on the other side. I found myself wishing we'd never get off that bridge, or that it would snap and break and we'd plunge like a school bus down into the great chasm between worlds where all things are lost, like dreams and socks in the dryer. I wondered how anything so fragile as our lives exists in the world.

"You sure you wanna go through with this?" Loopey axed. "If you don't, say so, and I'll turn the car around, and we'll just go to school like nothing happened."

I was so choked up I couldn't say nothing. What was I gonna say? Take me back across that bridge to the other side? She wouldn't of unnerstood, and I couldn't of 'splained. I shook my

head, and then nodded and then stepped out into the rain again and ran to the clinic.

Inside, it was like it was nothing like I'd imagined. The walls were brick and the floor linoleum and there was no place with soft edges and no place warm, but all tile and brick, with steel furniture and cold, hard chairs with postage-stamp cushions. I set to shivering so much I thought I'd start jumping across the floor like a washing machine that's out of balance. On the walls were posters declaring "It's your decision" and such like things. There was a poster with a picture of a girl on it. She was probably 'bout my age. She had her hands propped up on her hips, real confident like, and below her was the words 'bout how she was a free woman, and she had the freedom to speak out and say anything she wanted to, and to live the way she wanted, and play the kind of music she wanted, and write the poetry she wanted, and dress the way she wanted, and color her hair the way she wanted, and color it the way she wanted, do whatever it was she wanted with her body – tattoo it if she wanted, pierce her navel if she wanted, pull a hair, squeeze a zit, or end a pregnancy – it was all the same thing to her. If that's what she decided she wanted to do, it was her freedom to do whatever she wanted and weren't nobody else's say-so.

I found myself wondering where Abe was, if he was alright, and what he would think of the decision I was making that would kill whatever it had been that was been had been between us.

Loopey put her arm around me. I leaned back in under her arm, the only arm that'd touched me since Abe had gone away, and keep on shivering because it was the only thing I could do, but that was okay, I guess, cuz that was my decision, weren't it?

Loopey helped me fill out a questionnaire by reading out questions such like was I certain I wanted to do this, and I realized this was my decision, and nobody was making me do what was 'bout to be done, and I was undergoing this medical pro-seizure (that's what they called it) after fully considering what my options was and that this was the best decision for me and my future (they dint seem to be curious about the baby's future). I'd give a little nod or a shake of my head and Loopey would put a check mark on the form. I was sure that they'd reject me on account of my shaking. I couldn't stop. Maggie Singer'd told me that if it looked to them that I wasn't ready to go forward, they wouldn't let. It wouldn't be proper to let me do such a think if I wasn't in my right mind, see.

Loopey axed me, did I know my "partner's name." Partner I thought was kinda a funny way to refer to what me and Abe been to each other, sounded like we had played a game of checkers or something -- though not the kind of funny I could laugh at. Since I was so wore out, my laugh came out like a choke, but seeing as I dint no complications, and I sure as Hades dint want to get Abe in no trouble, I shook my head no -- maybe a bit too hard given that it made my eyes hurt.

After a while, the nurse came. She was wearing this bright white uniform and one of them nurse's caps that flared out at the sides and white stockings like she'd fallen into a vat of paint. I thought she was going to tell me to leave on account I was shivering so much and was obviously having some problems, but she shoved a little white cup at me at. "Take this," she said.

I looked at the cup. I guess I was pretty much out of it, because it dint register at first. I mean, like what was I supposed to do with it? "It's empty."

"There's some water over there," she told me, jerking her head in the direction of a water cooler

"But I ain't thirsty," I told her.

She give me a look like she thought I was so stupid I couldn't even know how to feed myself. She shoves out her closed hand at me, curled up like a fist, and when I don't move, she wiggles her hand impatient, like. "Take these." So I reach up and let her drop some pills in my hand, and I still dint know what to do. "They'll calm your nerves," she said clomped away, her shoes making hard little tapping sounds on the linoleum floor and leaving me staring like a slackjawed mouthbreather at the pills in one hand and the empty Dixie cup in the other.

"I'll get it for you," Loopey says, and in just a minute, she comes back in a minute with a little cup of water. I put the pills in my mouth. They tasted like ashes and stuck to my tongue, my mouth was so dry. I couldn't swallow them the first try, my throat was

so closed up, so I had to send Loopey back for another cup of water.

After a while, I stopped shivering and started feeling a little light headed, but I dint leave under Loopey's arm.

Maggie Singer kinda floated in out of nowhere. She was talking to the nurse in voices so soft I couldn't hear, except when she came closer saying over her shoulder at the nurse, "She's my client. I'll talk to her." She came and set herself down next to me. "I like to check up on my girls," she said, or something like.

"Everything'll be alright, dear," Maggie said. "It's always hardest the first time." The way she said it, sounded like she 'spected there to be more'n once. I knew right then and there, if I knew anything, sitting there clenching my fists so tight that I was drawing blood, that I weren't never gonna get inside shouting distance of a man again, so there weren't gonna be no next time.

Maggie helped Loopey dig the money out of my purse, the money I'd earned working the concessions counter over at the Graham Cinema and I was saving for my prom dress, and went over the form we'd been filling out, making sure it was all done right. "I'll just put my name down here," she said, writing some numbers in a little box. "I want them to know you're my girl."

Then the nurse came and got me, and Loopey said she'd wait in the car. I nodded. She dint want to be no nowhere around there.

And to tell the truth, neither did I.

That's when the doctor come and talk to me and we made a pointment for the next week to do IT and by the time i got back to the car, Loopey took one look atme. "You're shaking like a soaked dog," she says.

"I am a soaked dog," I tell her back. Not making no pologies nor scuses. I reckon I am what i am, an thats all there is to it.

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## *Angel of mercy*

At the pointment they brought me into a room where there was a whole bunch of sharp-looking surgical tools laid out on a table beside the bed. Well, it weren't really a bed, but one of them doctor's office tables, you know, with the stirrups that you got to put your feet up in and lie there spread out for the whole world to see, if it weren't for the sheet that covered your privates. The doctor and a couple nurses came in and out of the room, and 'cept for 'casionally lifting the sheet to see if I was still there, none of them really took more notice of me than they would've an old, sick dog - 'cepting they might have talked to the dog wons in a while. They seemed kinda in a hurry, almost like they was 'noyed with me, like I was getting in the way of their



doing more 'portant things. One nurse, when she caught me following her with my eyes, snapped at me, even though I hadn't said a thing, "Calm down, everything will be fine." If there's one thing that makes a body start thinking everything's not fine, it's some other body sisting that it is.

So figuring it made the nurses nervous to look at 'em, I set to scanning the room. Next to the table was something that looked like the wet-and-dry vac in my Uncle Willie's workshop. I could imagine 'em putting that up inside me and sucking the life outta me. I saw something that looked like long tweezer-grabbers and then there was a syringe with a needle long enough to come outta Doc McCreedy's bag – he's the large animal vet that works the farms 'round McCauleysville, giving shots to the horses and cattle and delivering the calves and colts and cutting the bulls and gelding the stallions that needed it, which might not be such a bad idea for some of the boys 'round here, if you know what I mean.

And when I say "large animal vet," I mean he's a vet for large animals, not that he's large hisself. Actually, he's pretty small, for a fella, you come right down to it. A small neat man, wearing a cotton-linen suit and a pin-stripe shirt and a bow-tie wherever he goes and changing into overalls like a people-doctor puts on a white smock before he goes to work. Anyway, this needle was as big as anything I seen come outta ol' Doc's bag to stick a horse with.

I could only 'magine what they was gonna do with it on me.

With my mind drifting like this, and I guess the drugs they give me earlier starting to kick it, suddenly it all come to me in a sparkle. It was like one of them moments you see in the movies when all your life flashes by you, 'cept since I seen it all before, it was more like the previously-seen-in-earlier-episodes part, but after that, in another flash, I saw something that I ain't seen before – my life as it oughta be, if all this hadn't happened, like it was gonna be before it all changed – how'd I be going to school, getting an education get my P-H-deegree, so I could fulfill myself and my ambitions to be a teacher, and then maybe meet a nice, middle-class man (alright, I confess, a rich guy) to marry and make a family with. Then I thought how they was right, Maggie Singer, and my Mom and Daddy, and my granmas, and all, when they said that this baby would get in the way of all my operatunities.

I dint put too much thought to it -- how their tune done change from being high-n-mighty-respect-the-sanctuary-of-life holy rollers to not my litel girl done got knocked up by that black sonabitch -- but it was there. None. The. Less.

But with all of em yammerin at me, I got to thinking how there's some life not worth living, just like they said. What's the worth of living a life in poverty, just to grow up and get knocked up, never get an education, always be degraded, struggling and knowing nothing but going without and living a life

of pure-tee misery. Being one of them poor people in the dirt world who're so miserable and down at the mouth they sell their organs to hospitals and such like for transplants for rich people, and these same people who is doin' the buying would be glad to buy a baby or a little kid for their body parts, a little baby's heart or a kidney or something.

That's really what I was doing, I thought -- selling a body part -- for this baby was really a part of me -- sellin a body part so's I could live that nice clean life I was meant to live, and so's she could come back sometime else an' have a better life somewhere else with somebody else. Better off never being alive, just like Maggie Singer said. (You note I don't say "dead" because something that was never alive can't be said to be dead.) Better off never even being born, so's I could have a better future.

But what if the cost of my better future was -- an' I couldn't fool myself, I had to tell myself the truth -- her? All them little baby steps she'd never take, all the dresses she'd never wear, never love nobody and never be loved? I got it all twisted 'round in my head and started looking at it from the other direction. What if she was born, and there came a time that I dint have a TV, or a car that run decent, or money to pay for my college toohishun? Would I just sell my baby to somebody who would use her body parts for experiments or transplants and get me enough money to buy me that new wide screen, or a SUV, or even a better education?

All these crazy thoughts whirled 'round in my head like some fool dog chasing its own tail. But then I started to wonder, is the dog chasing the tail, or the tail the dog? And what happens when I catch up with this tale and I bite down on it? I started feeling more and more convicted that at the end of the trail, I'd find that the truth of the matter was that I'd sold my baby so's I could buy me something new and shiny. But what if I turned out to be like one of them lottery winners that a year down the road comes out to be just as broke as they was before, living in some broke-down trailer somewhere? And what if in that shiny, brand new future, I was living in a bigger house, with a more prestidigitatious job title, would letting this fella in the white coat suck my baby outta me with his wet-and-dry vac and flush her down the drain or toss what's left of her into the dumpster out back be justified by the price I got? Was Judas justified by the thirty pieces of silver? Would he have been justified if it'd been a hundred?

I guess if a person is smart enough, she can figure out anything, make anything make sense and convince herself that it's right no matter how crooked the path, but I just wasn't that smart like Harry. I just couldn't do it.

The nurse slipped up behind me and covered my face with a mask, and I hear the whosh of the gas, and my head starts to spin like I was on one of them whirly gigs at the state fair, and my eyes roll up to the top of my head and I see the picture on the

ceiling they had for the girls to look at so you wouldn't have to think about what was happening to you.

It was a picture of a lit candle, and as I was tumbling down a long slide, I thought of Maggie Singer and the candles in her office that she lights to her poor, lost babies; poor Maggie Singer with her lonely cucumber that she slips condoms on and her waiting for the man that would never come back and the babies that would never be born, and something rises up outta me – I don't know where it come from, it mighta been ol' Beelzebub hisself repossessing me – but I start tugging and pulling at that mask, and with that sleepy gas pumping into my face, I got into a regular wrestle-maniac, steel-cage smack down, Jacob - wrestling - with-his-own-private-angel-in-the-Bible wrestling match.

I couldn't hardly see straight, and the whole room was spinning 'round me -- I'd be looking at one thing and all of a sudden another would sudden like pop up in front of me. All the time that I was wrestling with that mask, the doctor was trying to figure out how to turn on the wet-and-dry vac, so he weren't paying no mind to me, just 'nother no-count, knocked-up piece of trailer trash tumbling 'round on his operation table.

Then a door opens somewhere, and the nurse comes back in holding a tray, and she see sees me wrestling with the plastic band like it were some sort of giant boa constriction, and she screams, "Doctor!" and that's when I see the white light. I

guess it was just the sunlight coming in the door from the window in the waiting room, but I think to myself (who else am I gonna think to?): Run to daylight! Just like them football players say when they're carrying the pigskin, only I'm carrying something much more precious than that -- my own little piggy-goes-to-market. Run to daylight!

And I just forget about that dern stretchy band, and I dart for the light. She tries to block me, but she's got her hands full with the tray and can't do much more than lift her elbows at me, so with her flared nurses cap and her white uniform and flapping at me with her elbows, she looks for all the world like an angel fluttering with little amputated wings, and the mask finally pops off and the 'lastic snaps it up side her head, and she staggers back, and I break free and run.

I can't quite keep to the center of the hall, but I navigate by bouncing off one side and another. I'm pretty pleased at how clever I am, using the wall as a guide rail to the big flashing red sign at the end of the corridor and busting through the steel door to the outside.

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Lay me down on white pillows

The asphalt and gravel in the parking lot would've hurt my feet anytime else only now I couldn't feel nothing, though it wernt till some time later I discovered my feet was all tore up and bleeding. I must've looked awful funny, the wings of the hospital gown flapping in the wind as I scuttled down Robert E. Lee Street with my bottom hanging out for the whole world to see.

But there I was standin' in the parking lot, my hospital gown flappin' in the wind, and getting' drenched in the rain ... and it was rainin' somethin terrible ... like the skies done split open and were dumping down great big buckets of water on us or like all the angels in heaven was cryin' ... or peein' on our heads (but there I go again).

Loopey was standin out in the parkin lot. I figger she went out to get a smoke or somethin. "What're you doing? You can't be all done? Not like that!"

"I don't know what I'm doing," I tell her. "I don't have the slightest, but I know one thing. I ain't gonna kill this baby that's inside me."

I hear Maggie Singer screaming behind me. "Don't do this, Angel-Louise!" I feel her grabbing me from behind, and I look back, and her face is all twisted up, though I can't tell you if it's on account of the commission she's losing or if she's 'fraid one might get away from her. "You'll ruin your life," she said. "You'll ruin your baby's life. He's not wanted. You dint choose her."

"No," I said, "but she chose me, and I'll just have to go with that."

Loopey weren't no where to be seen an I dint know where to go, I'd run to the end of the parkin' lot, and it seemed like I was at the end of the world. The lot ended and run off into the trees there, those loblolly and Georgia pines that stand so straight, silent and tall, like God's own humungous Christmas tree lot, only it's owned instead by Mrs. Georgia Pacific.

And that's when the rest of em caught up with me an started tryin to bring me back in side to finish the job they begun.

"It's dangerous to stop now," Maggie said. "Think of the damage you might do to the fetus."

"I don't know what you think you're doin' young lady, my mama screamed. If the neighbors find out about this."

"Screw the neighbors!" I screamed at her.

"Well, you already have."

"What I mean is," my daddy continued, "if my parishers found out, we'll be drummed out of the church. Jesus forgives all sins, but they don't."

"Think of your future."

"Remember it's your choice. Don't be pressured by anything you've heard."

"You've got such a future in front of you. You don't need this ... this ..." He couldn't say it ... "It'll just be a weight to drag you down. Howe're you going to go to college. You know what happens to



girls who have babies in high school? You don't need ..."

"Young lady don't count on a penny of support from me ... "

"Who's going to want to marry you if you dragging around some little chocolate drop ... god bless 'em, no offense, but facts is facts. People aren't as open minded as they oughta be."

"It's not like it's a real baby. Not like it had already been born."

"If you don't get back in there, you can forget about coming home. I don't want to have anything to do with you."

"It's your choice, but I'm so afraid you're going to make the wrong choice, and ruin your own future life ..."

"If you don't go through with this, you'll never find a man who'll love you ..."

And it was then that it struck me. They was all thinking about themselves ... how this might affect them. And holding up pictures of how terrible it would be for me. And yelling at me to think about me, and my future, and my college education, and my career, and my cice, and my going back to church, and my coming home, and my finding a man who would love me, or leastwise marry me ... but no one had a word to say for the life that was abornin inside me.

No one had one thought my baby. And that's when I looked through the rain ... I was drenched like a dog that'd fallen in the flood ... and looked out

across the parking lot and there by the side of the road, out under a giant loblolly pine sheltering from the storm, Loopey stood atop her car wavin' at me ... there was a break in the storm behind her, and the sky was lit up, and the water wasn't coming down so fierce and that's when it hit me. If I did this, and found a man who loved me for me ... the me who would kill her own baby ... then would I really want that kind of man's love ... and if I dint tell him and he loved me anyways ... wouldn't I always be afraid to let him see me like i really was? The real me?

And lookin' out and seein' Loopey wavin' like a flagman gone crazy at the Indie 500, I knew there was one person that'd look out for me and my baby. That'd help me find a place out of the storm and I lit out for the highway.

It was the second time I raced but this time, the drugs'd wore off and I wasn't just loopin along, desperate an aimless, I was was headin someplace, headin for a territory i ain't never been before but i could see where Loopey was pointing at.

I was bare foot and it was like I was racing little Billy Thompson down by the lake the time he snatched off my Easter bonnet and tossed it in the water, and I lit out after him, set to whallop him good, only this time, it was me that was being chased, but just the same, ain't no one was gonna catch me.

Loopey's already had her car going before I even slid into the seat. I had to hop in like them old fashion hobos hopping a train.

She drove down the road a bit like a cat out of hell with its tail afire. She took a couple turns onto some other highways – I can't say which ones, exactly – and after a while we started breathing a little easier. "You'd better slow down," I tell her. "Don't want to get stopped for no ticket." So, she does and by this time I was shivering like a dog come in out of a snow storm. She cranks up the heat full blast and reaches into the back and drags up a coat she had back there. "Put this on," she sez.

I drape it over me backwards, kinda. "What am I gonna do now?" I wasn't feelin' sorry for myself, but I was startin to think. Here I was, half-pregnant (which is a fool thing to say! Nobody can be half pregnant. I was certifiably full-on pregnant tho just half way to delivering up my baby). No where to go, not a roof to put over my head, and not even a full suit of clothes. I couldnt hardly wander around the streets for the next four months in my hospital gown with my rear end hanging out!

I heard tell of this place down in Charleston," Loopey told me. "St. Fredericka's. It's not Christian, but they'll take care of you till your baby comes."

"At this point, I don't care if it is heathen, slong as they don't sacrifice my baby on no high altar. So that's where I'll be. In the Fimary."

On the way back, with Loopey driving and the music on the radio and us rising and falling on them mountain roads like on a roller coaster in and out of blankets of fog, sometimes so thick that the mist spotted the windshield with tear drops, and

sometimes us rising like out of white billows of steam to see a sky as blue as Christiana's little eyes and a party of pink and white blossoms on the trees by the side of the highway, so happy and pretty like a little 'un's birthday party -- so cheerful, so full of life -- that's when, dipping in and out of them clouds like we was flying, and me feeling like I was finally laying myself down on God's own white pillows, I let out everything I'd been holding in and cried.

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## HOME for way wild girls

Well, I dint go thru with it. Guess thats pretty obvious right now. My Granmas got wind of what was going on and brought in my mommy n daddy, they ranged to take me down to some place in Charleston for girls like me that'd lost their way, as they liked ta call it, thos far as i could make out, i hadnt lost no sort of way at all, i was going whichever way i was going.

They drove me to that place down in Charleston that Loopey mentioned. It was an old building with no signs, built, it looked like, more'n a hundred years ago, with a wide front porch that belted it all around and painted with white paint that was peeling in places. It was made of wood and looked like it had been somebody's home once, but now was my home.

All the way down there, my mom and daddy weren't talking. My mama was clenching her teeth awful, I thought she was gonna drive her teeth up into her brain. Every now and then she'd make a groan like somebody having a nightmare. I was sitting in the backseat, and they was in the front. They didn't talk to each other, neither, but that wasn't unusual since they dint, these days.

It was one of them days it looks like the sky is about to burst out ... the whole world is drooping. Everything's dragging. Even the dog lying by the country store we stopped at dint seem to take much interest in anything, but just kinda lifted its head and barked out of a sense of obligation, even though you could tell it dint have its heart in it.

They drove me up to this large plantation house that had been swallowed up by the city. There were apartment buildings and little houses all around. Out front, was a little sign that said, ST. FREDERICKA EURPHRASIA HOME FOR WAY WILD GIRLS. I guess that's what I was. Way wild. A way wild girl dumped here in a house on Waywild Way, on my wild way to-ward the place where bad people go. (Sorry, I couldn't help it. It just sounded so funny.)

But waywild what?

Inside, I guess you couldn't say there was a reception desk. It was dreadful hot with a single fan whirling way in the middle of the room, more swatting at flies than stirring up any breez.

When it came time for my for my folks to go, my Daddy dint say nothing but pushed a Bible into my hands, like he'd been keeping it all this time for me. "You're gonna be havin' a lot of time on your hands, so maybe you might could be reading this. I don't suppose they have any Bibles around the place, not being Christian, an all."

"They're Catholic, Daddy. They have Bibles."

"But they's Catholic Bibles. Not Christian," he sez. "Not that it don't matter to you no more."

"What part do you want me to read, daddy?"

Like withal he'd done, I was supposed to be taking moral advice from him. And my mama, she just looked at me with her rheumy red eyes and said "Ruined. Think about how you've ruined your life."

And then they left.

A little nun showed me to my room. An when I say litel, I ain't being smart-a\* an all -- but she was litraly small. Like, short. She had dark hair that was tied right tight round her head an she walked with her head down like she was lost deep in thinkin, or she was mighty intrested in her shoes. One or the tother.

She walked ahead of me and dint say nothing. When her keys jangled in her hands, she switched her grip to hold them still. I guess she dint like the thought that she was locking us girls up. I dint mind, though, 'cuz I was there of my own free will. It was a place where I was safe.

And I was left alone in a little room, with a little single bed in one corner, and a table by the bed,

and an old wooden dresser against the wall and a picture of Jesus over it. This Jesus had a big glowing heart and his eyes seemed to follow you around the room wherever you went.

I put my stuff away. Put the Bible on the bedside table. And sat down on the bed. I was waiting, I guess. Wasn't nothing for me to do then but wait ... and wait I did. Dint do nothing else but wait. Wait forever like I was in a grave, only I was gravid.

I like that word. Gravid. I looked it up. Means "distended or full of eggs." I thought of it a lot then. Made me feel like a queen ant sitting on her eggs, waiting for them to hatch. Her belly swollen with millions and millions of eggs, swelling up like a giant dirigible (I like that word too -- its like a big ol blimp), so full of life growing inside.

Gravid. Grave. Gravity. Gratitude. Graven. Gravely. Gravy. All that was gracious and glorious I was gravid with. With little Christiana here. Finally I was someplace where we were safe. Me an my litel one. Where she could grow without somebody trying to get at her. And kill her.

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*i finally get to where we're goin'*

Watermelon growing on a vine,  
tick swelling at a dog's neck,

water baloon being filled up at a garden hose  
or

being blowed up at a party by a kid who ain't  
gonna stop till the baloon bursts,  
tire being pumped full till its ready to x-  
plode,

watermelon on two spindly vines,  
elephant on two stork legs,  
great queen ant swelling up with a million  
eggs,

Goodyear blimp floating above the earth,  
connected only with feeding tubes,  
beach ball rolling along on the waves,  
sail full with the wind,  
fat man with all his meals carried in front of  
him,

me possessed by an alien bout ready to burst  
from my belly,

water hose stuck in my mouth an i drunk so  
much I was swelling up,

giant python passing a cow through,  
puffer fish puffed up at the prick of danger,  
(in my case the prick of a prick)

blister all swoll up,  
clown with pillows stuffed down his pants,  
hanger with a baby airplane rattling around  
inside,

pod carrying a baby pea,  
mama kangaroo with a wallaby in her pouch,  
chipmunk cheeks,  
pumped-up basketball,



winner of the pie eating context,  
Mother Earth bout to birth the cosmos,  
Ms. Piggy heavy with the Cookie Monster's  
love child.  
angel food cake rising with the yeast of life.

Wish I could say something else about my stay in the HOME, but that was about it. Just waiting and growing and more waiting. There was a bunch of us ther at st. josephs, girls that come in from all over the state for one reason or another, some that was gonna give their babies away and some that were hiding away so as they could keep 'em. I still wasn't real clear about what I was gona do, except I knew something would come to me. So I waited.

They was awful nice to me there. I have to say, they was mighty christen for catholics. The sisters cooked for me, read us the Bible and talked to us, kept us cheered up and pepped us up cause it was awful easy to get down on ourselves, and start to think that all the pople in our lives had been right that wanted us to kill our babies, that maybe it was better for the little ones not to be brought into this world ... and better for us too. But the sisters talked to us about how our babies was growing, what they looked like at different stages, and was as thrilled as our own mothers oughted to have been when they kicked. A doctor came in regular to check up on us, just to make sure everything was develping natural like.

aS my time was coming near, i got this terrible urge to clean up my room. I took to scrubbig and scrubbing, sweeping it down and cleaning the windows ... and it wasn't all too big so I must've gone over it near twenty times and near scrubbed a hole in the floor. One of the sisters, sister marta ann, remarked how she figured it was nearly my time, as i was hayving like a mama bird buildin her nest n' all.

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all fin (like it sez at the end of children of pair  
a dice)

An that's my story. I hate to have bothered you with it, but it done me awful good to tell it. you see, I'm still trying to figure stuff out ... what I'm going to do and all. So, i bin thinking about this, with everybody and all telling me i dint have no choice, I figured i do have one, I could do to this little baby what everybody else has done to me ... or I could try to make a better start. Be true to somebody, even when nobody has ever been true to me.

As soon as I can, I'm gonna write Loopey and tell her how everything turned out alright. And then after a spell goes by, I spose I'll write my mom and dad ... just to let them know I'm doing alright ... not out of spite ... cuz I done a lot of thinking while I was

carrying Christine, and there's no reasons for any spite. There's enough of that in the world.

I sposed they was doing their best by their lights even tho they nearly got my baby killed ... but that's what they'd been taught and itd hardened their hearts .. if only they cold've come to known I I knowed ... I wish they could 've ... but then, I dint know it myself till almost too late. And Maggie Singer? Well, all I can do is pray for her.

You got me to confide in you, i done told you all my secrets, just hope you dont turn each one of them gainst me. You might not trust me because i want you to know, i'm really not a bad person, i jes made a mistake of trustin someone who ... what can i say bout him? it werent nothing he done nesarily ... but loving somebody n trusting someone isn't something you do part way. If you can't say, I trust you ... then you don't trust. It's like being half-way pregnant – which probably isn't the best comparison to use at right at this time ... but you're either it or not (what i mean is there's no being half way pregnant)

I lay down with him n we took all my clothes off in front of itch other and showed ourselves naked ... not a pretty sight, I guess, but which one of us is ... we've all got lumps and bumps and warts and little funny spots ... too fat someplaces and too skinny in others ... none of us got souls like airbrushed like a magazine model ... I got naked in my soul with him, and then he was took away from me.

But the place we lay down on was a bed of thorns to trap us up ... it isnt that I care about gettin pregnant ... well, I mean I cared, but not in a way that I expected him to do anything about it, but then with all what happened he jest wasnt strong enough to be true to me... an I unnerstan. It was pretty terrible.

Jes like somebody told me once ... friends come and go. Only enemies and family are forever.

It was great being Abe's friend for a while. Now, all I've got is my little family here ... fact, the only one who has been true to me -- my Granma BettyLou -- is gone and Granma LucyMae pulling out daily bread for an answer that doesn't seem to answer my questions ... my mama's married to the Methodist minister, and my father's off with his new wife, and my uncle is off in the rest rooms at the mall.

So that's why I packed up my stuff and hightailed it outta there. The sisters gave me some money from the collections, enough to take a bus out to the coast, and the address of a place out here that would help me get started up on my own.

There werent nothing left for us there, so's i got us a ticket on the 4 ay em bus heading west to Californya an me and litel Christiana wernt gonna stop till we got to the place where my daddy used keep on telling me i was gonna end up if i dint watch out, the place where all the bad people go to. But I guess i'll be so busy shakin' hands with new friends, i wont have nothng to worry bout.

And thats all I gotta say

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